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BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

yesterday, today

Eva Brück

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Dear Reader!

The following episodes are part and parcel of life in the region which used to be referred to as "behind the Iron Curtain".

Each of these episodes is based on facts.

They are arranged in three main parts:

Part I:

"The day before yesterday".

A glance back at that which perished in the flames of the War of Wars; questions which arise today in looking back: will the Germans henceforth be identified with the Nazis for all time by the rest of the world - even though there had been German anti-Nazis and German Nazi-victims- and although the generations born later were not involved?

One of the exhibits in a show-case of the former Nazi concentration camp of Auschwitz is a battered brown suitcase inscribed : THOMAS FISCHER, born on 3.2.41, TODDLER.

What might Thomas Fischer have been in 1996 -had his ashes not been scattered by the winds over the earth of this site of mass-murder? How many human beings and human values perished in those flames, and why?

The son of Holocaust survivors- who returned to post-war Germany full of hopes and illusions - feels alien in the country of his birth and independently of his environment finds his Jewish roots.

Part II: "Under the Red Star" - flashlights on life in Eastern Europe -in the USSR and the GDR during the first 4 post-war decades; comparisons. And the question:

Could there ever and anywhere be Utopia on earth?

Part III: The new blessings of the new democracy and freedom in a 'constitutional state'; the only hope left for the present and future: the insight that alone we are nothing; united we are strong...

I-After the War of Wars

Memories

i- Just that Brief Moment...

The sky is blue, almost cloudless. The sun is burning.

Feige Meiseles standing near the kitchen window, bent over a steaming bowl, is washing dishes. From time to time she straightens her back, sighs, wipes the sweat from her brow and adjusts the kerchief over her grey hair with her rough, work-worn hands. Two boys, about ten years old, are chatting outside the kitchen window, wearing long, black caftans, with scull caps and long side-locks. One of them is holding a pack of books tied up in a leather-strap under his arm.

"Tell me - who's that, Hitler?" the smaller boy, frail, with big black eyes in a pale face, is asking his friend.

"That 's a very bad man", the other boy replies; he is slightly taller, with a similarly pale face and intelligent, dark eyes.

"Why?"

"Well...because...because he's just bad...mother told me.."

And then, in February 1943, in the dead of night, they bashed in the door of the little house, they dragged the old woman, her daughter and the small children out of their beds - even the baby was torn out of its cradle - and they chased them out into the frosty night, without leaving them time to realise what was happening, or to put on some clothes. They smashed up everything in the house, seized what they wanted and threw everything else on the floor.

Feige Meiseles and her family were not the only ones shivering in the icy cold; men - mostly old men the younger ones had been

rounded up and driven off long before; women and children, still half asleep, with tousled hair, huddled in blankets hastily thrown over their night-dresses, pyjamas or underwear, bewildered, desperate, angry and indignant, or intimidated and terrified; some of them had managed to snatch pieces of luggage, others were packed with bedding, some had wheelbarrows. Uniformed men with steel helmets over cynical, brutally distorted faces were indiscriminately beating and kicking into the crowd, shouting curses and abuses:

"Come on, get moving, you dirty Jewish swine!"

"Mummy, Mummy! My fiddle!" a small boy cried out in despair, "Wait for me! I must get my fiddle!"

He broke away from the crowd in an effort to run back.

A shot... a kick - and his small body rolled into the ditch by the roadside.

All the rest were driven off and forced into a closed off quarter of Warsaw - the Ghetto - or straight into the death camps to be gassed and burnt.

Their only choice was: either to be slaughtered, or to die fighting.

And the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto decided to fight. Half starved, badly equipped, entirely left to their own devices they arose to fight the last battle. The rest of the world, although aware of what was going on, turned away without raising a finger to help.

The sewers were their only link with the outer world, but death awaited most of them even there. Hitler sent bomber aircraft, heavy tanks and soldiers armed to their teeth to destroy the Ghetto. Finally they blew up one house after the other, systematically, thoroughly, according to a well organised

plan. Within three weeks there were only smoking rubble and ruins; among them were the remains of an old woman who had washed her dishes not long before, in a small Polish village where people had not known much more about the world around them and about Hitler and the Nazis than they had gathered from a rumour, according to which there was a man named Hitler in Germany, who was a dreadful villain...

The sky is blue, almost cloudless. The sun is burning. A dozen years later a motley crowd of cheerful young people from all corners of the earth are flooding the spacious squares and streets of newly flourishing, rebuilt free Warsaw, hemmed in by attractive buildings brightly gleaming in the sunlight. Busses had taken many of these young people to Muranow, where a monument marks the entrance to the former Ghetto. Two lights are burning before it. Two opposite rows of panels with enlarged photos found on captured Nazi soldiers lead up to the monument; the photos show scenes of horror inside the Ghetto-walls. Youth groups representing the various countries are silently moving up to the monument to lay wreaths. Choirs are standing on both sides of the monument: one from Israel, holding up a banderole inscribed with Hebrew letters, on the other side a choir of Polish Jews. Like distant, foreboding peals of thunder the Song of the Moor-Soldiers (1) followed by the Jewish Partisans' Song: "Never say you're on your last way" is rising to the cloudless sky. Memories of Ghetto-life emerging from the recent past take shape, vaguely at first, and, as the singing wells up seizing all hearts with the reminiscence of boundless human suffering, wrath and undaunted courage, burning like fire in an open wound.

At that point a girl in the Israeli delegation ,overwhelmed by painful recollections bursts into tears and desparately clings to her neighbour. A girl of the German delegation nearby, moved by the urge to show her sympathy, is making her way to the sobbing Israeli, but as she attempts to put her arm around the other girl's shoulder she is rejected and pushed into the surrounding crowd.

How could that girl, who had come from Israel to Warsaw, where all her family had perished in the flames only a few years before,know, that the German girl she had so violently rejected, had been exiled with her family from the country of her birth by the same Nazi brutes who had caused her own sufferings?

The solemn ceremony is over. Slowly the delegates of youth from many countries of the world are strolling back to their busses, in groups, in pairs. The German girl is alone on the deserted square.She has a sensation as though she had been slapped in the face for a tactless faux pas, yet at the same time feeling hurt and humiliated;would the Germans henceforth be indiscriminately identified with the Nazis for all times? After all,there were - and there are - decent Germans, and many of them had been persecuted and murdered by the Nazis...

She notes evidence of new life everywhere in this city: building sites and new houses - only a smoke-blackened wall opposite the monument bleakly recalls the time when other houses had stood on this site.

A hand reluctantly touching her shoulder makes her turn round with a jerk.And then - a voice in German:

"Don't go!...Forgive me..please..it was just that brief moment.."

1) Song of the Moor-Soldiers - song of prisoners in Nazi
concentration camps

ii - The Suitcase

Behind the window of a large show-case in one of the barracks of the former Nazi concentration camp of Oswiencim, among a heap of shoes, clothing, bags, pots and pans, toothbrushes, combs, shaving brushes and other utensils, there is a battered brown suitcase, inscribed with white capital letters on the lid:

THOMAS FISCHER, b. 3.2.1941, TODDLER

In the centre of the room there is another show-case with a pile of baby clothing and shoes - tiny white, pink and blue jackets, rompers, dresses, pieces of underwear and mittens for helplessly fidgeting baby hands...

Thomas Fischer would be a grown man today; maybe with a family, children and possibly grandchildren.

But Thomas Fischer is dead.

Ruth and David Fischer had worn a yellow Star of David under Hitler. This identified them as outcasts, whom everyone could insult, humiliate and maltreat; because they were Jews, and in Hitler-Germany Jews were not regarded as human beings.

In that night of February 1941 Ruth Fischer had given birth to her son on an emergency bed at the home of courageous friends. They had concealed them since the "Crystal Night" pogrom three years before; by coincidence Ruth and David Fischer had not been at their home when it was devastated and burnt out by Nazi vandals during that night.

When Ruth held her little son for the first time, she had no thought of sufferings, humiliation or danger; she was immersed in happiness about the little bundle in her arms, with soft, fluffy black hair covering the delicate head of her baby.

"My son..."

In her thoughts she saw Thomas as a little boy, laughing and playing. Would he really look like that one day? David entered the room, sat down beside the bed and held her hand. His kindly brown eyes looked tenderly at his wife and child, and together they dreamed of the future of their son.

"This nightmare couldn't last forever", David said, "when it's all over he will grow up normally. Maybe he will one day be an engineer, or an architect or doctor...or perhaps a sportsman..."

And then one day Ruth was standing among men and women, reading a proclamation:

"...the following things must be taken along: warm clothing, blankets, provisions for 14 days, household utensils, crockery, work clothing and implements...Everyone will work in their profession...Those failing to turn up...must expect the highest penalty..."

Deportation; hopes, fears, uncertainty...

At the station there was complete chaos. Police, SA and SS everywhere; it had become evident that the destiny of transportation was not merely for work somewhere "in the East". As the frightened, agitated crowd of old and young men and women and children were forced into dirty cattle trucks the shouting, beating Nazis displayed unrestrained brutality. The trucks were so tightly packed that there was hardly air to breathe. It was worst of all for women with small children.

Thomas Fischer was eighteen months old. A pretty child, well cared for, well nourished and healthy despite the hard times. David mustered all his strength in the effort to secure a few millimetres of space for his wife and child. He clung desperately

to his two brown suitcases, both marked with their names in big white letters. One of the suitcases contained baby things for Thomas, the other was packed with as many of their possessions as they had managed to squeeze in up to the last moment. Ruth and David also each had a rucksack on their back.

After three days of travelling, almost without food and drink; with little light and air; without opportunities to relieve themselves, despite long stops on the way; tightly cramped together with sick, hysterical or apathetic people, full of fearful anticipation of their destiny, they arrived in Oswiencim. With blows and shouting they were unloaded by armed SS-men with wild, hungry

Alsations. Their possessions were seized, there was a terrible commotion, with shouting and sobbing, some broke down, covered in blood. Men were separated from their wives, children from their parents. A constant stream of trucks, crammed full with sick and old people and children, transported to be gassed immediately on their arrival, was running along the road between the unloading ramp and the crematorium. The place was riddled with shouting, armed SS-men with aggressive dogs.

"Ruth", David said to his wife, "you must try to keep calm, I know it's hard, but I need both hands for the suitcases. You take care of Thomas, we must stick together whatever happens!"

His dense black hair was flying into his face, his eyes, usually cheerful and kind, were looking with serious concentration and resolve under his dark brows.

'Just keep calm!' he said to himself.

The crowd shoved and pushed, there was hardly air to breathe. Ruth held Thomas tightly in her arms, trying to calm him, but she could hardly move and felt near to suffocating.

"The suitcase with the baby things, David! There is some powdered milk for Thomas in it!"

"Let me carry it", a young man near Ruth and David said, "the main thing now is not to get lost in the crowd!"

Little Thomas, wrapped in a blue, soft blanket kept quite still in his mother's arms and looked at her, bewildered, with his big dark eyes. He was so intimidated by the unaccustomed tumult that he could not even cry. The door was opened, people tumbled out of the waggon. David held his arm around his wife's shoulders, he tried to protect her and the child with his powerful body against the blows of the SS-men and the teeth of their dogs. He looked on helplessly when the suitcases were torn from the young man, who was instantly absorbed by the crowd and disappeared.

Together with about 2000 others they were forced to take off their clothes, and then squeezed into a room of roughly 210 square metres. The doors were closed. Thomas was crying and asking to drink. Ruth embraced him tightly, David put his arms around his wife and son. And then they saw tins dropping down through openings in the ceiling of the overcrowded room. People were shouting, coughing, choking, stretching out their arms. Their eyes widened with fear, they all pushed towards the doors...

"G A S !"

The hot sun of August scorched the battered brown suitcase beside a pot and a torn eiderdown on the deadly silent ramp. The suitcase was inscribed with white printed letters:

Thomas Fischer, b. 3.2.1941, TODDLER.

Today, half a century later, visitors of the former concentration camp of Oswiencim look at the battered brown suitcase with the white inscription, displayed in a large show-case in one of the camp barracks, in a pile of shaving brushes, household utensils, childrens' shoes and clothing, toys, bags, spectacles and womens' hair - things which had once belonged to living human beings. Thomas Fischer was an innocent baby. He and many other innocent people were murdered for the sole reason that they were Jews, or because they had been honest and courageous in resisting against the Nazi criminals.

Many years after the liberation of the camp the vermin which had feasted on the inmates of the barracks was still alive.

In Germany human vermin even survived up to half a century after the Holocaust: old Nazis still alive are rewarded for their atrocities with pensions of 3000 DM a month and more; their surviving victims have to manage on monthly allocations of less than half that sum.

And the chemical industry, which had made vast profits on the Cyclone B gas used to massacre millions of innocent men, women and children is continuing to flourish in the Federal Republic of Germany. That industry does not have to pay compensation to the victims, the gentlemen responsible can continue to live an untroubled life.

Another summer ,50 years after Thomas Fischer and his parents were gassed, the heat is making the air vibrate over the expanse of waste land. No sounds interrupt the ringing silence. No flowers, no birds, no crickets live in this desolate stretch of land. The smell of death prevails in the air; or, maybe, it only seems as if

the stench of burnt human flesh is emanated from this earth? The multitude of small white "pebbles" scattered around shallow pools of muddy water are the remains of some of the 4 million human beings murdered in Oswiencim.

Some of these small white "pebbles" had belonged to Thomas Fischer, born on February 3rd, 1941, gassed and burnt in August 1942, at the age of eighteen months.

The Outsider

He was born into a whirlpool of sensations, cosmic flights, super-speed transportation; into an age of cold war between the East and the West of the world, in the wake of the most devastating world war in human history, with hot regional wars, in which the Small Ones fought out the differences of the Big Ones; into a world, where human and ethical values were knocked over like the figures in a game of croquet, and where big words were uttered with little significance.

Ten years after the War of Wars he squatted on the platform of a Polish railway station, as a small chap with fair curls and big brown eyes, engrossed in playing with a large, blue, shining mechanical toy car, surrounded by admiring Polish children and adults with tired, pale faces and threadbare clothes.

"You are going to meet your grandpa", he was told. "We thought that he had been killed by Hitler's gangs at a concentration camp. But now we know that he is still alive."

"What is that place where my grandpa was?"

"A dreadful place, where people were hurt and killed."

"Why were they hurt and killed there?"

"Because they were Jews."

"What are Jews?"

"People who had been thrown out of their country very very long ago by nasty men as bad as Hitler and his gangs. They fled to many countries of the world and settled there, but most people in those countries did not like them, because they were uninvited strangers, who looked different, spoke a different language and lived in a different way. Your grandpa, your Mummy and Daddy and you -all of us are Jews."

"And now my Grandpa is alive after all?"

The light

It was a cold, dark night. The dogs were barking furiously in the yard.

"I have to let them loose at night, because of the prowling drunks, and hooligans", said the old man.

They were sitting in the little kitchen, dimly lit by a low-powered bulb. Outside the window the moon, which crept out from behind a curtain of inky clouds, cast a beam of blueish, cold light across the farmyard with its rough cobble stones and a high dung-heap in the middle. The dogs had stopped barking and howling. The silence of the night was only interrupted by the tickling of an ancient kitchen clock.

The old man rose from his chair and switched on a clumsy radio, reminiscent of a prehistoric monster. He turned the button, listening intensely, and then, suddenly, the dull, indifferent expression of his face changed. Through the wheezes, crackling atmospheric noises, over thousands of miles, the radio waves carried the sounds of music into the little kitchen in a remote corner of Poland; his bright blue eyes under an uneven, powerful forehead and a bush of white hair were lit up by a passionate, burning flame.

"Listen!" he whispered, as though enchanted,

"listen...Hatikva...the song of hope...directly from Eretz Israel!"

He listened, and they all listened; the little boy and his parents. They listened to the melody, and they listened to his story.

And there was always hope...

"... during the first weeks after you had all left us in Vienna we had to hide in a cellar. And then we decided to leave as well. We first went to Belgium, then to France. After the war broke out they turned us over to the Nazis. From the internment camp in the south of France where we had finally landed, we were sent in open cattle trucks to the East. We had no idea about the destination. After a journey of several days and nights, without food or drink and no chance to go out to relieve our nature, many were dead, or more dead than alive. I happened to stand near a door. They picked me out, together with others whom they considered 'fit for work'. We were 600. After three weeks only 50 were left to fill up another working gang. A couple of weeks later that group of 100 was reduced to 15...and so on. We envied each one that died. One day I decided to speed up the end. Death seemed to have something against me - he always picked on the others. It was -40°C, the guards turned up their collars against the icy wind, flung their arms about and stamped with their feet to keep warm. I took off my clothes and stripped to the waist. The guard near by could not avoid to see me, but then devil seemed to have pulled a blind over his eyes.

That was in the winter of 1944. The front was fast moving westwards, some of the Nazi officers had started to slip away, disguised as prisoners, in the hope of escaping punishment, and the guards were fed up with having to watch us out there in the frost.

I moved up closer to one of them and kicked a block of ice with my foot. He turned round and noticed me.

'What the hell do you think you're doing, you filthy Jew?' he yelled, 'get dressed at once!'

'Why are you shouting at me,' I said politely to provoke him. 'You want us to kick off, don't you? I'm only trying to help you do your job, so why get excited?'

I was hoping he would shoot me and at last set an end to this hell. But I was useful to them, because I never could work slowly or badly - not even there, and life in that place was only a few degrees worse than what I had been used to before. But at that point I had had enough and I was hoping for a quick end.

The guard did not kill me. He turned round and walked away.

In the spring of 1945 my last strength had gone. We were taken out of the camp to work, and I managed to slip away into a deserted barn. I lay down in the wet, stinking mud and rotting straw, closed my eyes and waited for death. I remember feeling light, as though being carried into the other world, and then I saw the Lord God standing before me, but he looked so different from what I had imagined him: he had the face of a kind young peasant boy, with friendly grey eyes, he wore a Red Army uniform and said to me in Russian: 'Get up, mate! It's all over! Do you hear me?'

'I can't stand up,' I said to the Lord God in our language, which he seemed to understand. This did not surprise me. They say that we all go back to the place where we were born after death, and in Galicia, where I was born, they all spoke Russian, Polish and Yiddish. The Lord God smiled and dragged me out of the barn. He looked at my striped clothes and said:

'See that house over there? That's yours for keeps! We sent the Fritzes to hell! They won't hurt you any more!'

I looked at him in amazement and rubbed my eyes: so death had once more refused to accept me!

Before I could say another word, the Lord God had smashed the door of a little house nearby with his rifle butt, chased out the inmates and pushed me inside.

I looked around in amazement and rubbed my eyes: no doubt - death had really refused once again to accept me!

I sat in the kitchen of the house - in this kitchen here. There was a fire in the stove, and a big pot of soup was steaming on it.

When the daylight outside faded and the fire in the stove died down, there was a noise outside, and a faint knock at the door. The inhabitants of the house had come back under cover of the night, and they begged me to let them in.

Why not, I thought; after all, these poor Polish peasants could hardly be blamed for what happened to us. Maybe they hardly knew what had happened, maybe they did not want to have anything to do with it all. Why should I want to take revenge on these people? I let them in, they fed me and cared for me. When I began to feel better, I did my share of work in their farmyard. But above all, I tried to find a way to go to the Holy Land. It did not take long to realise, however, that there was no way for me to get there. And I always hoped that some of you were still alive, that we might come together again one day... And then I bought this radio from an auction of the legacy of a man who died and had no one to take over his things. And I listen every night to the Hatikva...

His dream

The little boy was fast asleep. In his dreams he saw his grandfather, stripped to the waist in the snow, and some villain out of his book of fairy tales, who tried to kill him. And then a uniformed soldier named Mister Lord God, who understood all languages intervened just in time...

The first lesson

Many years passed.

The little boy was teaching his grandfather all the things which he was learning at school. The old man had come to live with his son's family.

"Didn't you go to school when you were a boy?"

"The school I went to was not like your school", said the old man to his grandson.

"It was called 'Kheder', and there we were taught to read the Holy Scriptures."

He showed the boy a thick book with Hebrew script.

"What's that?"

"These are Hebrew letters used by the Jews."

"Can you read them?"

"I have forgotten most of them. I was taught them too long ago. And I never really learnt your letters."

They spent much time together. The old man had never broken with his past, he spoke about his life in the concentration camp, and also about his life very long ago, in the Galician "Shtetl", where he had lived up to the First World War.

He spoke about that past as if the present did not exist, and in his presence his grandson joined him in that world, in which he felt almost more at ease than in his contemporary environment. The synagogue, where his grandfather took him on Friday night, was part of that other different world. Standing there, with a black skull cap on his fair curls, he felt at ease and proud of his grandfather, who was respectfully greeted by everybody.

At school the children were taught to cherish and defend the ideals of freedom, justice, honesty and courage; and to honour the human incarnations of those ideals. Yet the boy could not fail to notice that those who preached such words, changed their faces like the weather cock on the church spire in the wind.

While still in the nursery he had been a lively, cheerful and trustful child. Once, standing by the open window with his little red-headed friend, they had been caught throwing earth out of a flower pot out of the window onto the heads of people in the street. The little redhead turned round, with a badly fitting mask of innocence, and stammered:

"We were good boys!"

"You needn't tell lies," said the curly fair haired boy with a broad grin, "my Mummy and Daddy don't spank!"

The decision

More years passed.

The boy had become silent and reserved. His large brown eyes were luminous, stern and serious, in strange contrast to his soft golden curls, and tender childlike features.

It was long after midnight. His mother in the neighbouring room had still been reading in bed and was just about to switch off the light, when suddenly the door was opened and her son stood there, like an apparition in striped pyjamas, with a big book under his arm.

"I'm sorry to trouble you so late at night", he said in a calm, but unusually resolute voice, "but I must tell you that I have decided to learn Hebrew and to become a real Jew."

His mother sat up in bed, rubbed her eyes, looked at her son and grunted:

"Hmmm..."

Silence. A clock in the neighbouring flat struck twelve times. A car was rushing past outside, and a railway was hooting somewhere in the distance.

"The adults always tell us to be honest; but even our teachers speak differently to us in class than among themselves in the courtyard during break. You often start to trust some adult - when you are told that this person is a villain and you should believe in someone else instead. If you say what you really think and you try to argue, they give you bad marks and say that you are spoilt by bad influences... But this here," he pointed to his book, "is real! You fought against the Nazis long ago. Today you have to make compromises, just as we have to at school. These don't have to humiliate themselves!"

And he sat down by his mother's bedside and opened the book, showing her pictures of young people, who had come in striped prison clothes to a desert country, braving the bullets of foreign rulers who tried in vain to keep them out, and then those same young people turned the desert land into flourishing orange groves.

"You listen to me, my boy," said his mother, "It is always easier to overthrow a bad structure than to replace it by a better one. After the defeat of a bad old life the new life developed in its place will always take a long time to operate properly. And you should not have any illusions about the life shown in your book; life there, in Palestine, is by no means paradise! There is no paradise on earth - nowhere and at no time!"

"I know that, and I can also see the good things in my life here, and I know that you are sincere. But what I want is to participate in something really great, together with people to whom I can feel I belong...here I always feel I don't belong and my mind and hands are tied up..."

"There are contradictions, handicaps and problems everywhere," his mother replied. "For me the main thing is participation in building up a life not dominated by the striving for money and power, but for justice, friendship and peace, even if many things still don't work as they should....But ...really, don't you think we should discuss these things in the morning? I'm dead tired..."

"No, I must have this out now! Even if I go to the synagogue - I still believe in good people, but I must feel that I belong ...at school I can't belong, because I hate disco and I respect the girls..."

His mother wanted to say so much - but she said nothing.

"Would you mind if I became a real Jew, if I studied Hebrew, and then one day..."

"Aren't you a Jew now?"

He blushed, lowered his eyes, and said:

"Grandpa always laughs about the sort of Jew I am..."

"I'll tell you what I think," his mother said, "you're old enough to decide about your way of life. As long as it is a way which does not lead you to deception, arrogance, cowardice, injustice or inhumanity - I shall not do anything to stop you, and I shall try to give you all the help I can, even if your way should not be my way. Only - please don't have vain illusions!

And now - off to bed with you, I can't keep my eyes open, and I must get up early tomorrow and go to work."

Learning, work, patience and strength

Soon after that nocturnal conversation the boy and his mother sat in the study of the Rabbi.

"You realise what it means to be a real Jew?" he asked the lad standing before him.

"It means - becoming a real man, a real personality, it means a great deal of study, work, patience and strength to overcome obstacles inside yourself and around you..."

The letter

Somewhere, far away in another world, a war broke out.

The boy had by then learned a good deal of Hebrew and studied the Talmud and the Torah. His bedside lamp was burning half the night. The Rabbi was proud of his pupil: "He has a good head, that boy. Things I have to repeat 10 times to others, he will grasp at once!"

One evening after the war had just broken out in that other world far away, in which people were defending their old and new homeland, which they had reached twenty years before in the

striped clothes of Nazi concentration camps, under a shower of bullets fired by foreign soldiers, men and women had gathered on a Friday night after a week of hard work, around festively laid tables in a large dining hall. Vases of flowers and bowls of fruit stood on the white table cloth. In the light of many candles they listened, as a letter, written in their language, was read out to them. It had come from another world, far away, it was written by a fair-haired boy on the threshold of adult life. He was cut off from their world by a wall of stone, and by a barrage of hostility. The past of his family and of his people had motivated him to reject those barriers, to adhere to his faith, and to refuse to extirpate his roots.

He concluded his letter with the words:

"...and so I want to wish peace to you and to our people..."

As they listened, many had tears in their eyes.

The circumcision

They sat in the waiting room of the hospital. Squatting in a corner, they felt somehow out of place among those men in black hats who were discussing problems strange to them and about which they knew little. One of the men held a bottle of wine in his hand. Another carried a small package. A nurse appeared. The Rabbi followed her. After a while the nurse returned with the Rabbi. It was a strange procession that moved along the passage, past men in wheel-chairs, or sitting on benches with bandaged legs or arms, in dressing gowns, their curious eyes following the procession down the corridor, where it stopped outside a small room at the end. Soft rain was rustling in the lilac bushes outside the open window. Then they carried him in. He lay on a stretcher, indescribably frail, in deep unconsciousness, as though there was no life in his body. Only a few hours before he had moved about in full health. And suddenly images arose in the minds of his mother, as she stood there beside him: Babi

Yar...Muranov...charred walls...And she wanted to take him off that stretcher, to wake him up to revive him, to call him back to active life, to integrate him in the life around him from which he was yearning to escape - a life for which she had battled and to which she had attached so much hope when she had been his present age...

The Rabbi stood by the window and read a prayer, and all the other men in black hats, swaying their bodies in a strange rhythm prayed with him and sang in strange, thin voices. And as the Rabbi held his hand over the boy's forehead to bless him and pronounced his Hebrew name, Paltiel opened his eyes and they were full of light and great, calm happiness...

The tension in the room eased. The black hats were moving about. Everyone was congratulating the parents. There were murmurs of "Maseltov! Maseltov!"

His eyes were searching for his parents..

"Maseltov! Maseltov, little Paltiel!"

II- Under the Red Star

iv - One Among Many

The Russian educationalist Ivan Issayevitch Grivkov (1905-1977) was one of the numerous courageous, decent, honest and self-sacrificing Russians who had maintained ~~their~~ integrity up to the end of ~~their~~ life in one of the bleakest periods of his country within our century. Today a torrent of dirt is sweeping over all acquisitions of the decades between 1917 and 1989, and a tendency prevails today to throw out the baby with the bath-water and to regard everything linked with that period exclusively as negative. Within the scope of the present glimpses at recent developments in the eastern part of our continent, the life and work of I.I. Grivkov stand for the overwhelming mass of the inconspicuous behind the "Iron Curtain", whose life and work deserve to be remembered.

The medium-sized, somewhat stocky elderly man, with grey hair, expressive brown eyes in a square-shaped face with saddlenose, full lips and high cheek-bones would hardly have been noticed among the bustling crowd in the streets of Moscow. Slightly bent forward, he walked on his way with short steps. In his modest attire he appeared very similar to the countless others of peasant origin in the hustling mass moving in the streets, in parks, on station platforms, at bus stops, in shops and markets.

Those who did not know him would hardly have assumed that this man of unobtrusive appearance, unsophisticated, natural and friendly manner and delicate humour was in fact a high-ranking educationalist appreciated and respected among professional specialists all over the world. He frequently travelled by bus or "Metro" - the Moscow underground - whereas others in his position were hardly expected to travel otherwise than with their driver by car.

Up to his death he lived in his small three-room flat in the Lenin Prospect, a noisy traffic artery near the centre of Moscow, with motor vehicles thundering past at all hours of the day and night;

for years together with nine members of his family, until his two married sons with their children eventually moved into their own flats, and his mother-in-law passed away.

Ivan Issayevitch owned a time-worn "Pobeda" car, he also had his private driver, Grigori Petrovitch - some years older than himself - he had served with Budyonny's horsemen in the Civil War - and in the course of many years he had become a reliable, faithful friend. Ivan Issayevitch, however, liked to move about and live like all other "ordinary mortals"; privileges, he said, spoilt peoples' characters.

In his childhood he had been nicknamed "Vanya-Moroz" (Vanya-Frost), because he was always cold. Even in the summer. And Vanya was always hungry. In the winter he could only go to school when it was his turn to wear the only pair of bast shoes in the family. In the summer he missed school on many days, when he tended the neighbour's geese in return for a bowl of gruel for himself and his brothers and sisters. He could only remember his mother on her sick-bed, his father only came home from work to eat and to sleep; he was so exhausted from his work that he hardly had the strength to say anything before he dropped into bed at night.

The village school teacher, an elderly, frail woman, noticed that Vanya was unusually intelligent. She took charge of him after his parents and his younger brothers and sisters all died during the hungry, icy winter of 1916. He remained with her until the end of her life. Thanks to her efforts Vanya was able to continue his education at the high school in the nearest town.

1917.

Many things changed in the little village. Yesterday's serfs had suddenly become the "lords".

The villagers reacted in different ways: some of them regarded their unwonted new rights and freedoms as licence for pillaging. Vanya was a peaceful and kind-hearted boy, and he refused to take part in all excesses. Despite the knowledge acquired at the high school, he never became arrogant or presuming.

He had his first "baptism of fire" when armed gangs threatened a neighbouring village. A volunteer was wanted for the suicidal mission of transporting arms and ammunition across 50 miles of bare steppe.

Vanya came forward to do the job; in a rickety cart, drawn by a decrepit ancient ox, Vanya set out with his load, concealed under a heap of straw.

After the villagers had almost given up hope that he was still alive, he had suddenly turned up again unharmed: a lone horseman had found him, exhausted, half starved, beside the dead ox and the broken cart. He had fetched helpers, taken Vanya and his consignment to the desparate village and brought him back home. At the "Pedteckhnikum" - the teachers' training college in the small town of Bogutchar - he had advanced to the status of the respected student "Ivan Issayevitch". After graduation he was sent to a tiny village at the end of the world, about 60 miles from the nearest railway station, to take charge of the village school. After an extremely hard start, when he had almost decided to give up in despair, he had finally managed to gain the confidence of his pupils, their parents and the other village inhabitants. When he was subsequently appointed to the post of director at the teachers' training college where he had been a student not long before, the inhabitants of the little village

opposed his departure even more emphatically than they had rejected him at first.

In his new position Ivan Issayevitch also remained as modest, friendly and helpful as before, and very soon he won popularity and confidence among his students, colleagues and the local population.

Those in need of help knew that Ivan Issayevitch would do all he could to solve their respective problems. On one occasion he found a way to prevent the dismissal of an elderly school teacher with long years of service just before she was due to retire, although this had involved a collision with a local police chief, which might well have cost his own job. He had managed to discover a skilful lawyer, and he had personally ventured to set out on a long and hazardous journey to Moscow to take the case directly to the Minister of Education.

In the Second World War Ivan Issayevitch was appointed as head of the railway school administration of the Ukraine. He had an extremely hard time with constantly changing superiors: one after the other they had been removed and condemned as "Enemies of the People"; they were deported or even killed and never heard of again; neither they themselves, nor their friends and relatives had any idea about the reasons.

Thanks to his knowledge of human nature and the skilful way of handling people with the most various characters, Ivan Issayevitch managed to evade a similar fate.

"I balanced across life in those years, like a rope-walker between two high church steeples", he said many years later.

During the war he was seriously wounded, which marked him for the rest of his life, and ultimately led to his death.

He was elected as trade union representative of the educational workers of his country, and won respect and affection among the ranks of that profession in the world at numerous international gatherings.

It was only after his retirement due to his deteriorating health condition that Ivan Issayevitch Grivkov found the time to complete his doctor's dissertation on the "Essentials of a Humane and Cultured Education and Training of Youth". He defended his thesis with distinction - at the age of 61 years - despite serious opposition to his principles from various sides and by widespread contradicting educational practices at all levels.

Shortly before his death in 1977, when he was no longer able to leave his room, a very old woman had come to see him.

"I came a very long way, because I did not want to leave this world without once more setting my eyes on the benefactor to whom I owed the chance to live and raise my children", she said.

Ivan Issayevitch had been the only one to stand up for this woman, years ago, when she had been the victim of a vile informer. All others to whom she had desperately appealed for help had turned away from her to save their own skin.

The Russian educationalist Ivan Issayevitch Grivkov belongs to those who had remained honest, upright, fearless and incorruptible throughout their entire life.

Without the events of October 1917 he might never have got further than the town nearest to his native village.

It is hard to understand, how the children and grandchildren of Russian parents and grandparents who had been tortured, humiliated and murdered by German Nazis could today hail a creature such as

the fascist Zhirinovsky. But economic distress and depravation do not enhance, but destroy human personality.

Nevertheless, even today Russia has a large community of people with similar qualities as Ivan Issayevitch Grivkov; only - that sort is less conspicuous.

v - Odessa Mama - Portrait of a City

A wise man once said, that Odessa Mama gave birth to her children with a violin in their hands. David Oistrakh, his son Igor, Yasha Heifetz and many other great violinists born in that city indicate that there must be some truth in that statement. Yet it is not the whole truth. The pianist Emil Gilels, the vocalist Bella Ručenko, the writers Sholem Aleikhem, Isaac Babel, Konstantin Paustovski, Valentin Katayev - to mention only a few - prove that Odessa Mama also equipped her children with piano-fingers, a pen or paintbrush in their hands, or with natural talents as scholars and scientists - the artist Leonid Pasternak, the ophthalmologist Filatov, who gave back their eyesight to many who had lost it...

An Odessite, however, could tell credulous visitors, with a serious face and a convincing tone of voice, that, actually, Charlie Chaplin was not really born in London, but in the Moldavanka in Odessa - and that, in fact, all who had made a name for themselves in truth originated from Odessa.

If anyone ventured to write a "curriculum vitae" of that city, as in one of the innumerable forms to be filled in in the course of a human life, it would contain the following data:

Date of birth: August 22nd, 1794

Place of birth: on the site of the former Turkish fortress

Khadzhibey, 46°29' northern latitude, 30°44'

eastern longitude, on the Black Sea coast.

Parents: General Suvorov and General Deribass, the sea and the inhabitants; they all gave birth to the city and made it grow into a world centre of culture and progress.

Apprenticed

profession: foreign trade expert, dock worker, architect, artist, musician, scientist, fighter.

Practised

profession: As above, also: teacher of scientists, artists, technologists and skilled workers at 14 institutes of higher learning, 26 trade schools, 130 high schools; industrial worker; tourist caterer (up to 1989);

Family situation: More than a million "home-grown children", plus more than a million summer inland and foreign visitors (up to 1989);

Special features: Lots of sun; 7 sandy beaches; catacombs; systematically structured road network; Many sight-seeing objects (opera house with 9 kilo gold content; Potemkin Steps, a.o.); population very witty, talented, courageous and spirited; (up to 1989).

Brief biographical notes: From the moment of birth - fight against the Turks (1787 - 1791); fight against foreign intervention (Crimean War, 1854 - 55); fight on the barricades of the revolutions (1905, 1917); in the Civil War (1918-1920); in the Second World War - 73 days resistance against the German Nazi siege (August-October 1941), 907 days guerilla war against the German Nazis (1941-1944), with resistance headquarters in the catacombs. After the liberation on April 10th, 1944, renewed flourish as international harbour,

trading centre, seaside resort, centre of culture, industry, science and learning and tourism. Since the break-down of the Soviet Union in 1990 - general decline of moral standards, economic, social and material security and explosive proliferation of crime, and violence, unemployment, poverty and misery; exodus of the intellectual and artistic élite, above all in the fear of reviving anti-Semitism.

Colourful Markets, Sunny Beaches

Up to the beginning of the tragic decline at the beginning of the Nineties Odessa Mama had many faces.

In the bustling crowd on the market she would critically muster a small triangle cut out of a water melon - after all, you don't buy a pig in a poke; in the overloaded bus she just managed to squeeze in, with one foot on the step and one suspended in midair, hanging on to the passenger before her, and relieved to find some buttons left on her crumpled coat as she got off the bus; or she could be seen on the sunny beach, her stately figure packed into a bright-blue bathing suit, with a bubbling torrent of talk, laughter and humour, surrounded by family and friends: Maria Abramovna, "Tyotya Mara" - Auntie Mara - to her friends. She was particularly clearly marked by the characteristic "family-features" of her city. In every situation she knew how to help herself and others, always cheerful and good tempered, singing joking, dancing, and giving courage and strength to all those around her. In the Second World War, as a nurse at the front line in Stalingrad, in the rank of an officer, shivering in the icy frost, hungry, without medical

equipment among the seriously wounded, she encouraged doctors and nurses to sing, dance and to present improvised performances; she gave courage to face life and to have confidence in the fiancée or wife waiting at home to young soldiers, who had lost a leg or an arm in the liberation of Budapest and Vienna, just before the end of the war. And many years later her appearance would brighten any bleak moods in her environment. She even managed to dance a temperamental "Gopak" at temperatures around 40° in the shade, while all others were near melting, infecting everyone with her enthusiasm.

Great and sparkling was Odessa Mama, praised in many verses and songs, like the sea which the town overlooks, and to whose sandy beaches numerous stairs and slopes descend. In the early hours of summer mornings, before the sun is burning at full strength and a light breeze is rippling the surface of the water, people loaded with baskets, blankets, rubber animals and air-mattresses would move in the direction of the sea, streaming down the stairs down to the beach. Another moving mass is heading towards the new port, from where small motorboats run out to the more distant beaches. The new port is also the starting point of trips to various destinations in the environment in the air-cushion speed-boats, the "Raketas" and "Kometas" as they are called, encountered on nearly all rivers, lakes and coastal waters of that vast country that used to be the USSR, travelling at an average speed of 60 m.p.h. Outside another kiosk a noisy crowd is scrambling for a chance to get hold of a ticket for one of the large luxury steamers, such as the "Ivan Franko" or the "Abkhazia", for excursions over several days as far as to the Crimea. On such sunny days everything is on the move; the youngest toddlers are

taken by their nursery nurses in neat lines, with serious, concentrated faces, each holding on to the panties of the one in front, to enjoy the fresh air, the water and sunshine on the beach. "Petushki" - red lollipops in the shape of a cock - corn, apricots, sun flower seeds and pastries are offered for sale on the beach, and rotund women in white overalls and with white kerchieves on their heads sit beside Kvass-barrels serving this popular fermented cooling drink to endless queues of thirsty customers.

At the end of the day the little cutters "Ussatovo", "Chernomor" and others come chugging back to the port, pouring out their load of sun-tanned, cheerful passengers- among them visitors from distant Kamtchatka and Sakhalin in the Far East, from Tchukotka and Murmansk beyond the Arctic circle, from Dushanbe in Central Asia, from Leningrad and Moscow, Yerevan and Tchita...

When Chekhov and Gorki trod these paths

Under the red-golden evening sky, in the mild, refreshing air after sunset, perfumed with the sweet fragrance of acacias in bloom, a motley crowd is moving up and down the famous Potemkin-stairs. The children, exhausted from bathing and playing in the sunshine, toddling along with their mothers and fathers, loaded with baskets and rubber toys, know nothing about the empty pram toppling down these stairs in Eisenstein's film "Battleship Potemkin"; nor about the bitter fighting which had taken place there twice within our century, and which did not fail to leave its scars in almost every Odessite family .

The dense foliage of the sea promenade is full of people at this hour ; families, couples and lone walkers; the benches lining the promenade on both sides are occupied by groups of giggling schoolgirls, lanky lads with portable radios, women chatting, or rocking prams, and old men, playing chess or domino, or just smoking a pipe and gazing into the distance, maybe into a time long past, when Chekhov, Bunin, Kuprin or Gorky had strolled along this path on their way to the Hotel "Odessa" nearby. Maybe these old men, who had been children in those days never came to this fashionable part of the town and had been at home in the dusty suburbs, where Isaac Babel's master-thief Benya Krik had reigned in the pubs with Gypsy music, tea houses and dance halls, and where sailors had spun yarns about their adventurous journeys across the seven seas, over a meal of juicy apricots, melons, aubergines, moist, salty cheese, olives and fish.

Tyotya Mara knows Sholem Aleikhem, the Moldovanka in its most colourful times, Benya Krik, the counts and princes who had owned the big patrician mansions and parks and who had frequented the sea promenade and the hotels "Odessa" and Krasny" in Chekhov's days only from books and accounts. When she was born in the early Twenties all these places had been opened to the general public, but life had still been full of privations. Mara was used to hard work since her early childhood: scrubbing and washing, carrying home heavy buckets of water from the well, hauling bags and sacks from the market, and living together on restricted space with many people. And yet she is always in good spirits.

In the darkness of the catacombs

Odessa Mama.

She has her bright and her bleak sides. Below the surface of the town the catacombs, originally underground quarries, spread out in a widely branched network with a total length of about 800 kilometers, like a vast labyrinth. Repeatedly new entrances would be discovered by accident in a cellar, or by children playing by the roadside, and imprudent curiosity causes adults and children to be swallowed up by the catacombs. Yet, in times of danger the catacombs offered shelter and protection on various occasions. At the time of the October Revolution of 1917 the printing press of many publications had been located there, and during the war against Nazi-Germany they functioned as headquarters of resistance. Wells in isolated farm yards were the only link with life on the surface. A large number of children served as go-betweens. Many were caught, tortured and murdered. Survivors report that not a single one of these children had betrayed anything. In the Deribassovskaya, one of the main streets of Odessa, mentioned in many literary works, there is a showcase with photos of children who had sacrificed their life in those days: "Tanya - 11 years; Vanya - 13 years; Seryozhka - 12 years...."

The catacombs are not hospitable: at a constant temperature of only a few degrees above freezing point the dark is so impenetrable and almighty, that all sounds and light are absorbed beyond a radius of a few yards. After two or three hours of standing on guard people began to hear sounds and to see shadows and they went out of their minds. And yet for 907 days men, women

and children had lived, studied, worked, eaten, slept, planned, fought and conquered there.

A family - widely branched like the catacombs

Mara's family was almost as widely branched as the catacombs below the town. During the war her relatives had been scattered to all directions; after the war they were reunited, even though with some losses.

The undisputed head of this family was Mara's uncle, "Dyadya Misha". On mild summer evenings they - like many Odessites, - would sit on stools and chairs on the pavement outside Dyadya Misha's little cobbler's shop in the Pushkin Street, chatting, exchanging a few words with passers-by, some would play cards, chess or domino. The lively little cobbler, with alert bird-like eyes behind thick glasses in his egg-shaped, bald head, sitting with a leather apron in his workshop in a glass-case during the day, was not only known for his skill in repairing shoes, boots and sandals. With his kindness and wisdom, acquired in the ruthless university of life, he also repaired broken marriages, friendships, hearts, toys and souls. His wife, known to everyone as "Tyotya Klara", carefully watched over the cleanliness and order in the small workshop and in the room behind it, with a large wall carpet above the bed, loaded with a pile of pillows, a refrigerator, television set, family photos and a large round table in the middle, under a mighty lampshade, which throned above it, like one of the Matryoshkas on sale at souvenir shops, stately, with a wide skirt; at all times someone was offered something to eat and drink at this table. Over 70 years old, Dyadya

Misha went swimming in the sea from March to October, every morning at 6 o'clock. In the summer he only came to town to work; otherwise the family life was transferred in the summer season above all to the courtyard of one of the wine-overgrown "Datchas" near the sea, which was rented for the whole season and was used by the large family, including children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews.

Datcha life

The long road in which the Datcha was situated had the imposing name "Perekopskaya Divisia shestnadtsatovo bolshovo fontana". There is no sign anywhere of any "large", "small" or "medium" fountain - as suggested by the name of the street, which refers to the water supply of the town before the opening of the public central water supply system in 1874. Up to that time - and for years after - the inhabitants had fetched their water from wells and natural springs. The wells had been named after the areas in which they were situated - and the name has remained up to the times, when Odessites had long since been spared the trouble of getting their water in heavy buckets, and only had to turn on the water tap in case of need.

The Datcha of Mara's family was situated in the last, the sixteenth "Big Fountain Station." It was the terminus of tramline no. 5. On one side of the street there was a long row of Datchas under shade-spending trees. Some of these structures were stately stone houses, many of them were shacks jumbled together from the most various materials "found" and "collected" by the inhabitants in some place - on lone building sites for example - and then transported by adventurous, original ways, mostly in the silence

of the night. Outside each of these Datchas there was a table, surrounded by a cheerfully chattering, laughing round enjoying a meal, the appetising odours of which filled the air. In the grounds around noisy children were chasing about, women hung up their washing, gossiping, scolding, laughing, and men sat outside their country abodes reading newspapers, playing cards, domino or chess and arguing about some problem, enveloped in a cloud of smoke from pipes, cigars or cigarettes. Groups of lively youngsters populated benches surrounding the trunks of ancient trees in the shade of dense foliage.

The Datcha of Mara's family was one of the ingeniously fabricated structures made of various kinds of materials "found" somewhere. The plexiglass of the "veranda" for instance was valuable "booty" from a lone building site in the vicinity. Their neighbour Lyonya, whose wife had gone to school with Mara's cousin Ida, had inherited his Datcha from his parents. It was a solidly built stone house, with three rooms and a spacious kitchen. He lived there with his wife and two children from March to October. Lyonya did not mind the long way to work: in town they all had to share a single room in a "communal" flat, where they had to live, eat, sleep.

Outside each of the rooms of the flat, inhabited by a different family, there was a cooker, where a woman was preparing a meal, mixed odours of fish, cabbage, onions, garlic, meat and soups enhanced the atmosphere of the long corridor. Beside the entrance door to the flat there was a collection of toilet seats suspended on a large hook, each marked with the name of the owner. Someone could always be seen with one of the toilet seats around their neck walking down the passage to the communally shared

lavatory, the only abode of rare moments of privacy, past the gossiping, cooking women surrounded by a cloud of steam.

At their Datcha life seemed luxury compared with this cramped and noisy existence.

Lyonya worked as a dental technician in a sanatorium. He had skilful hands and he was continuously modernising the house. Every visitor was invariably shown this Datcha as the pride of the entire settlement. Guests would also be taken to the spacious, clean kitchen. In a corner there was a square box-like piece of furniture, covered with motley coloured oil cloth and with a vase of fresh flowers on it. In cases of need the oilcloth and the flowers would be removed, the lid opened, revealing... a comfortable WC...

"Everything self-made", Lyonya commented with some pride; "everything from the laboratory - each screw, and all holes carefully worked with a dental drill..."

The reply to the question - with an inquiring glance at the steaming pots and pans on the large stove - why namely here..., was: "There is one single disgusting shit-hole here for 16 families. If I had my toilet outside, everybody would use it and it would soon look like that other filthy place..."

The grounds on which the Datchas stood belonged to a man who lived in Moscow, and each family paid him 600 roubles for the season. He just turned up to collect the money, otherwise each family had to arrange their own respective Datcha life.

A wedding- Odessa style

Mara had two daughters: Bella and Rita. Bella's wedding was celebrated in big style; for years after the whole family paid off the debt, since a wedding of this kind cost a lot of money.

One of Mara's neighbours was unlucky: two years after the first wedding of her son the couple divorced, and a year after there was a second wedding - while the debts of the first were still being paid off.

Bella's conjugal bliss was under a luckier star - and lasted up to the present day. Cousin Verotchka was told confidentially by Tyotyia Klara that she had engineered the whole procedure behind the scenes.

One day Klara's neighbour had come in to pour out his heart: "What can I do?" he asked in despair, "the wife is dead, and my boy, Fima, is twenty-one - and no bride within sight!"

'There should be a solution to this problem,' Klara thought to herself, and to her neighbour she said: "Don't you worry - just leave it to me!"

Mara had often complained to Klara, that her daughter Bella was already twenty, "ripe as an August-apple," but no thought of marriage!

Klara just shook her head - and got to work.

She asked Fima and Bella to come in for a princely meal. The following morning, when she came across Fima, she enquired with a sly, expectant look: "Well, my boy, what did you think of her? She's such a pretty girl... and so clever! And she cooks very well..."

Fima lowered his eyes, blushed and said: "but...she's so thin..."

At this point the following episode should be mentioned: the daughter of one of Mara's friends, a student named Maria, attracted the attention on the beach because of her slim figure. Maria herself, however, was not happy: "I simply can't manage to put on weight," she complained, "my bad luck! "

"why?" Mara wondered.

"Well... the men don't want to lie on a skeleton..."

Asked by Klara, what she thought of Fima, Bella replied meekly:

"He's so short..."

Yet the wedding took place a short time later.

"The car will be here punctually at 6 p.m.", Dyadya Misha had said. At that hour the relatives, who had come all the way from Armenia were to be ready at the door.

"If we arrive at 7 p.m. we'll still be early", cousin Verotchka said to her husband. And, indeed, when they turned up at ten past seven, Dyadya Misha was still running about in his underpants.

"Help me with these cuff links, will you?" he asked Verotchka, "my future son-in-law brought them and the shirt from Kiev - they don't have my large size here...and these cuff links... real glass!"

Klara was shooting about in her underwear like a wild hen, looking for her lipstick and the right stockings.

When the car had not come by 8 p.m., Dyadya Misha decided that they should walk to the "SAKS" - the "wedding Palace". "It's just around the corner", he said, "we shouldn't have ordered the car in the first place - they're so unreliable, these chaps..."

Despite the late hour it was still very warm. After about half an hour's walk Dyadya Misha made a woeful face: the new shoes were

tight, and Klara was happy that Verotchka, who always had half her household with her, could fix the bust corset with a few safety pins.

When they rang Mara's doorbell, everyone there was still in a nervous hurry getting ready.

Finally they arrived at the "SAKS"; a bustling crowd was gathered at the entrance. The large hall was packed, there was a smell of "Krasnaya Moskva"-scent, garlic, onion and sweat. Voluminous females clad in glittering, luminescent dresses - the latest fashion at the time - made from material obtained at the (semi)-legal bartering market from sailors, who had brought it from overseas. Their massive figures were squeezed into these dresses as tightly as sausages into their skins, and the flesh was bulging out at all edges and ends. Their faces were dripping with sweat, blueish-red with from the heat in the crowded hall and the effort to look ..less fat..and it appeared as though they would explode at the next deep breath.

Near the entrance a small band was playing sprightly Russian, Ukrainian, Gypsy and Jewish melodies. At intervals they interrupted and then solemnly performed Mendelssohn's Wedding March as a deep, mighty voice resounded from somewhere out of the universe: "We invite the bride and the groom Kravtchenko... Rabinovitch... Froimovitch..."

At last - Froimovitch!

To the majestic sounds of the Wedding March the crowd opened, like the sea opened to Moses as he lead his people across it, and the called-up family would proceed up the wide stairway covered with a red velvet carpet, under the watchful eyes of Marx, Engels and Lenin, whose large portraits overlooked the scene. The groom,

pale-faced, in a dark suit and with an uncomfortable tie, the bride in white, with veil and long trail, carried by little girls in wavy taffeta dresses and with brightly coloured hair sashes, were followed by a weeping Mama, a comforting Papa, relatives and friends. At the top of the stairway they entered a banqueting hall with a long table at the far end and a row of stern, stately men and women facing them. Once again the ominous voice resounded from space, summoning the young couple. Then a mighty Amazone rose from her seat at the table - which recalled the "Last Supper" - and, with admonishingly raised forefinger made a long speech about all the things which the intimidated young couple before her was thenceforth to do and not to do, after having taken the solemn step into married life (with significant clear relevant gestures). It was stuffy and hot, and when the Amazone suddenly raised her voice and commanded in a sharp tone: "Kiss now!" the two "victims" gave a start and twitched slightly, as they obeyed the order. After the words: "...and now I declare you as man and wife", the photographer took the floor. He hauled a huge, heavy camera into position, slipped his head under a black cloth, and a muffled voice said: "First the young couple! One...two... thrrrreee...smile!"

A flash, a bang, everyone jerked and pulled a face; then bride and groom with their parents; and again: "One...twoooo. and thrrrreee!!" And the same procedure the couple with relatives and friends....

Everybody breathed the fresh evening air outside with relief as the whole party left the building and moved in the direction of the restaurant.

The 124 guests around a vast table laden with all the wonders of the Ukrainian and Jewish cuisine and an abundant choice of beverages, included the directors of the places of employment of the young people, various representatives of the local élite, workmates and neighbours; everybody wanted to say a few words befitting the occasion, but after the first clinking of glasses there was only laughter, joking, feasting and dancing. "I really don't know how I got back home", Verotchka said the next day, "I only remember waking up with a hangover, hearing Mara's wailing voice at the door: 'do come to eat the remnants' she said, 'I need at least 30 people - it's all paid for!!!'"

Odessa Mama has many faces. Tourists will gratefully remember Yevgenia Petrovna, administrator at the "Hotel Krasny", who with calm friendliness helped to overcome all problems; many will always remember doctor Rita Yefimovna, although in frail health condition herself and of retirement age, she was ready to look after patients at all hours of the day and night up to the last day of her life.

In the crowd hardly noticed, but in the course of a turbulent history Odessa Mama always managed to raise her head again, even after the hardest ordeals.

As she wakes up the first rays of sunlight glitter on a dense mass of green leaves outside the windows and a restless sea of roofs and onion-shaped church spires emerges from the rosy light of early morning. The sounds of clattering shoes on the pavement and the clanking of milk jugs accompany the carillon to a melody from Dunayevsky's opera "White Acacias", followed by five sonorous chimes: Odessa Mama stretches her limbs to begin a new day...

...Up to the Nineties of our century.

Mara, Dyadya Misha, Yevgenia Petrovna and Rita Yefimovna died a few years before that time. Mara's younger daughter Rita is the only one of Mara's family still living in Odessa, with her husband and son. The others are living in New York and San Francisco. Like a large section of the intellectual élite of Odessa - artists, scientists, writers, musicians - most of Dyadya Misha's family and many of the numerous Jewish families living in Odessa, who left significant marks in the history of the town emigrated in the face of the revival of anti-Semitism, poverty and privation.

Gone are the days, when certain shortages had been compensated by the semi-legal bartering market, where sailors and visitors from all corners of the world would sell goods not available in the state shops. Gone are the seventy years, when many problems had to be faced, but life had basically offered material and social security to all.

It can only be hoped that Odessa Mama, who had always braved her troubled fate within a long and turbulent history, will ultimately survive the present troubles.

vi- A coincidental meeting, a pocket calculator, a bottle of Chanel no.5, a colic and much more besides...

(Excerpt from: "Through the Wall into the World -unusual travels across 4 decades and 4 continents")

The preliminaries to each attempt to break out during the 40 walled-in years was a tough battle against a jungle of bureaucracy, narrowmindedness, cowardice and stupidity.

Persistence, ingenuity, a good portion of impudence and lucky coincidences were the only weapons in this struggle.

It took me six years before I could implement my project to travel to the Far North, beyond the Arctic circle, to the Arctic Ocean.

It all began at a concert in the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow; Emil Gilels was playing Beethoven. The friend who had invited me spotted a couple, both writers, well known to her in the audience. The man had many times travelled to the Far North and published several books about this subject. I was introduced to them during an interval and they invited me for a meal at the Writers' Club after the concert, where they were meeting a young geologist from Yakutsk, Sasha Tyllar, who had for a long time tried in vain to get to the GDR to perfect his knowledge of German.

I invited him to come to the GDR with his wife and daughter, and he invited me to come to Yakutia.

All sounds very simple; but it is hard to imagine today, how much time, patience and nerves, how many tricks and ruses were required to make such an undertaking become reality.

To begin with several institutions and ministries had to give their consent as a basic prerequisite. As a freelance without Party membership and without "higher connections" this was inconceivable.

A private trip to the Soviet Far North? Who had ever heard of such a thing! Even for accredited journalists this was extremely complicated, and all the more so for Soviet and foreign tourists. Naturally all assistance was very valuable and solicited high appreciation.

My new Yakut friend urgently needed a pocket calculator. Such things were not available in the Soviet Union in those days; nor in the GDR. The import from the West was prohibited.

My mother came from England to visit me in the GDR, and bought a pocket calculator for her English money at the "Intershop", where many otherwise unobtainable objects were sold for hard currency. That was allowed.

The export of a pocket calculator from the GDR to the Soviet Union was not allowed.

But - I had a pocket calculator.

The next move was to disguise this private undertaking as a "business trip"; after months of endless vain attempts I had to recognise that a private trip as such was completely out of the question.

An official institution had to supply a "letter of delegation" to a "partner-institution" in the country to be visited. Then both "partners" had to apply for the required permissions to the different competent authorities (police, security authorities). In this connection it should be noted that each public institution of the GDR was allocated a limited number of

"business trips" every year, which were generally distributed by the "responsible Comrades" among themselves.

The chief editor of a journal for which I had for decades worked as a freelance, one of the rare individuals in Germany with admirable civil courage, provided the required "letter of delegation", and his equally spirited colleague of the Soviet "partner" journal supplied the necessary permissions from the Soviet Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Education, the security authorities and the Yakut Ministry of Education; all with the help of friends.

Letters travelled between Moscow, Berlin and Yakutsk; some took only a week, some took several weeks or even months, and some never arrived at all.

When at last all the necessary letters, stamps, seals and signatures were available, the flight ticket had to be obtained. Since, however, this was in reality a private visit for which I paid myself (the money for this trip would never have been granted to the chief editor of the journal by his superiors), great discretion and ingenuity had to be mustered.

The ticket for a journey to Moscow was not quite so complicated. I only needed a passport marked with the visa for entry, departure and re-entry to the GDR. This had to be applied for weeks before from my local police, who issued these visa upon production of an invitation confirmed by the competent Soviet authorities. That invitation cost the inviting Soviet side an immense amount of time, energy and nerves, and in many cases money.

Finally all conditions had been fulfilled - and I could buy my ticket to Moscow.

I decided to travel by train. In the control at the airport the pocket calculator might have been ruined.

The ticket for the flight from Moscow to Yakutsk, however, was a problem; a very considerable problem.

My friend in Moscow hastened from one place after the other to obtain that ticket; in vain.

In the end she was so exasperated that she had a colic.

Neither the "Intourist" travel agency, nor the "Aeroflot" office were authorised to sell such tickets.

After numerous enquiries my friend found out from a writer colleague that only an institution had the right to apply for a ticket for a flight to the Far North - to a prohibited area - and the traveller had to receive the ticket personally, exactly 10 (ten) days prior to departure; not earlier and not later than ten (10) days before departure.

Nevertheless my friend would not give up her endeavours. A writer herself, she investigated all possibilities within the Writers' Union, and - lo and behold - she discovered a chance! A benign secretary in the Travel Department of the Writers' Union let her know that she would do the job....if...provided....well, her dream had always been a bottle of Chanel No. 5...

That was not only very expensive - but it could not be obtained without hard, convertible currency, which I had to find somehow. Once again a lucky coincidence: I found out that an international gathering was shortly taking place in Portugal. I immediately applied to work there as interpreter and translator from and into several languages, in addition to producing press reports, interviews and photos.

I was accepted.

After all, it cost the organisers less to pay the travel costs, food, accommodation and pocket money for one person who would do all these jobs, than for a separate person for each of them.

For the sum total of my pocket money I bought a bottle of Chanel No.5 at the last moment in the airport, returned to Berlin,

changed my luggage and the following day, still exhausted from work at the conference, I was off to Moscow; thirty hours by train. I arrived with my bottle of Chanel No. 5 and the pocket calculator exactly 10 (ten) days before departure to Yakutsk.

There I dashed from one place to the other to collect all my papers and then finally to my self-sacrificing friend, to whom I triumphantly handed the perfume for the Secretary -and, of course, an expensive present for my friend.

The following day my friend turned up with a glowing face, proud of her success, and handed to me....no, not the ticket! She handed me a letter, which I was to produce at the Representation in Moscow of the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Yakutia, in order that I could, at long last, buy my flight ticket.

I was just about to leave the hotel for the Yakut Representation, when the telephone rang: I was asked to present myself as quickly as possible to -- the Representation of the ASSR of Yakutia in Moscow to receive my flight ticket.

When I arrived it turned out that TWO flight tickets were awaiting me there: my Yakut friend had meanwhile also been active to collect all the necessary documents for the purchase of the ticket!

The letter from Yakutsk with the relevant information was waiting for me in Berlin after my return from the Far North.

The last message I had received mentioned a different room number and a different name of the person I was to see than in the letter from the Writers' Union. I therefore looked up both of these gentlemen, one after the other. They knew nothing of each other; much better, I thought, otherwise there might have been complications.

The one was good natured and friendly, the other grumpy and curt, not to say rude. I spoke as little as possible, paid for the ticket (it cost surprisingly little), and left as quickly as I could. One of the two tickets I sold to a grateful vegetable grower from Odessa, who had been invited to Yakutsk for an exchange of experiences. He had all the necessary documents, but had not been able to get a flight ticket. In such cases it was useless to inquire about reasons. I made his acquaintance in the corridor of the Yakut Representation. Evidently his friends had not had the right kind of "connections".

Then came the day of departure.

And at that point it was my turn to have a colic, I took an icy cold shower, swallowed tablets which I had taken with me in wise foresight, shook myself and started on my way: at first to Aeroport, the airport in Moscow, where passengers were registered. From there a bus went to Domodedovo, the airport for flights to the Far East, Central Asia and the Far North.

Experienced friends had supplied me with huge parcels of provisions - sandwiches, chicken, eggs, fruit, cake, pastries... I wondered when all this was to be eaten, after all I expected to set out on a flight of some hours, not on an expedition lasting several weeks, but in fact this foresight proved to have been most prudent. Meals offered on inland flights were very sparing.

In addition we had to wait at the airport for 14 hours because of bad weather - not unusual in December. During this waiting time I had become acquainted with a considerable section of the Yakut intelligentsia - engineers, geologists, architects, physicians...

In thinly populated Yakutia there were far more reindeer than humans, and the section of travelling specialists was so small that most of them knew one another.

By the time we were in the air we had become a friendly community. We pooled all our provisions and shared everything. Otherwise we were only offered a tiny chunk of tough meat with a lot of skin and bones, presumably once belonging to a duck, some stale bread and sweet sticky stuff supposed to be "jam".

Then a pretty, slim Yakut stewardess announced in a sweet voice: "The outside temperature is -64°C ; in a few minutes we shall serve cooling drinks" (i.e. stale, luke-warm mineral water). Thereupon the passengers raised noisy protest. They called in a chorus: "We want hot tea!"

What we were offered was luke-warm tea-brew.

The stop-over in Novosibirsk did not, as envisaged, last 30 minutes, but two hours. The waiting room was overflowing with passengers, since the large silverbirds flew in from all directions for a stop-over due to bad weather. The only seating facility was a wooden fence. I squeezed my bottom, wrapped in a thick leather coat with fur lining between two fence bars and spent the waiting time over a game of chess with a Yakut architect likewise seated. We both had problems when we were asked to come quickly to our aircraft, which was due to continue its flight in a few minutes. The passengers of other aircraft made a desperate effort to fight their way into our plane, which was the first to

start again. They tried to make their way with the aid of heavy bags, rucksacks and sticks, wildly banging them about and bashing indiscriminately at their fellow passengers, cursing and swearing furiously. A hunter in thick fur clothing even made use of his rifle butt. Without analogous experiences during previous inland flights I would never have managed to regain my former seat. In flights from Moscow to Odessa for example it was up to each passenger to get hold of a seat: there were always more passengers than seats, since many seats were sold more than once. A wild, noisy, pushing crowd trying with all might and main to force its way up the stairs was the prelude to each of these flights, particularly in the summer season.

In Moscow the temperature had been -1°C at the time of departure. In Novosibirsk it was -10°C . and on arrival in Yakutsk it was -38°C .

Sasha Tyllar awaited me at the airport with a pair of "Unty" - reindeer fur boots with pretty coloured decorations and thick felt soles. One of his friends was working at the factory where these boots were made; they were not on sale in the shops. Sasha told me to put them on quickly, because leather shoes would immediately freeze stiff at this temperature.

We arrived in Yakutsk in the middle of the night. Only thanks to Sasha's persistence and patience a militia vehicle was found to take us and two other passengers into town. I got on with mixed feelings...after all - militia... but they were very friendly. In the house where Sasha and his family lived the staircase had been transformed into a skating rink: the water from a burst pipe had immediately frozen. An ice fan pretty to look at, glittering in all the colours of the rainbow had formed at the point where the

water came out of the broken pipe. We had some trouble hoisting ourselves and the luggage up the slippery stairs into the flat. The next morning the staircase did not show any signs of the nocturnal disaster - everything had promptly been repaired and cleaned up.-

On several occasions during this trip I noted this quick and nimble reaction in case of an emergency. People in the Far North depend on each other. Nature there is so merciless that hesitation in taking action in critical situations could mean the death of a human being.

During the following days Sasha dragged me from authority to authority with endless patience, in order to comply with all the registration formalities.

Our "good angel" was the Minister of Education, Alexandra Okhlopko, a delicate, lively little lady, with dark hair and friendly dark eyes. A teacher by profession, her energy and strong personality cleared all obstacles out of my way. Up to this day we have kept in touch, although by now she has retired and applies all her qualities to the upbringing and education of her grandchildren.

It hurts to see how everything achieved with so much trouble and sacrifices during the past 70 years is now being ruined and slandered, and that instead of hopeful prospects the population of these regions has fallen back into poverty and backwardness.

When I recently saw a television report, showing small children in Yakutia playing "drunks" around a decaying shack, I remembered the bright, spacious, warm nurseries I had seen on my trip, where children were in the good care of trained staff, preparing them for a useful life in a modern society...

viii--The Signature

I had actually managed to penetrate to his office; contrary to my anticipation the secretary had not turned me away.

"I'm afraid you will have to wait a little", she said politely, "Comrade Minister is very busy."

She asked me to sit down in a large soft chair near the door - with a friendly face and pleasant voice.

What a pity she's not the one to decide, I thought, she seems to be quite human.

As a matter of fact, the issue involved was not more than just a signature.

The chief editor of the magazine for which I was then working as foreign language editor had instructed me that I did not have the right to ask artists in France, Britain, Italy and Mexico for reproductions of their work in letters sent out on behalf of the magazine without the consent of the Minister of Culture. That consent, however, required a preliminary decision by the editorial board, which had to be convened for a session. Moreover, at that particular moment - in the year 1953, shortly after the "events" of June 17th, (1) it was quite out of the question for an art magazine of the GDR to entertain direct private contacts with persons of the "western world" outside of the official channels. Those "official channels", however, seemed to me far too complicated, bureaucratic and unreliable.

Firmly resolved to send off the letters to the artists concerned, I wanted to challenge destiny and to try to obtain the necessary signature of the Minister of Culture without the blessings of my boss.

(1) June 17th 1953: rising of workers in Berlin against the State

signature of the Minister of Culture without the blessings of my boss.

[(1) June 17th 1953: rising of workers in Berlin against the State]

The doorkeeper at the entrance to the building had briefly examined my identity card; when I said that I came from the art magazine, the name of which was evidently familiar to him, he presumed that my visit must be "officially sanctioned" and he unhesitatingly filled in the required visitors' form.

This meant that the first hurdle was taken: I had got as far as his anteroom - a good omen.

Was it really a sin and so inconceivable, that a member of the editorial staff of an art magazine of the GDR should wish to contact artists in the "western world" who were known as partisans of peace and justice, asking them for reproductions of their work for publication in the magazine? This would, after all, allow GDR artists, of whom only very few had access to the necessary hard currency for travels to western countries, to become acquainted with their colleagues in those countries and their work. What would it cost Mr. Comrade Minister to sign his name under a few short letters? Those were the thoughts passing through my mind while I was waiting. The secretary repeatedly glanced at her watch, lifted the receiver of the telephone on her desk, shook her head and regretfully said to me, with a sigh:

"I'm very sorry, but he's still busy..."

I was just about to give up hope - it was nearly the end of reception time - when the secretary said, with a sympathetic smile of relief: "Comrade Minister will see you now!"

An icy breath of air streamed towards me from the impervious, stolid creature at the far end of the spacious room. I presented my problem as briefly as possible - in the certain

presentiment that any human appeal would be a cry in the wilderness here. He appeared to be hardly listening, scribbled on a piece of paper and let me feel acutely aware that he considered my presence as a tedious nuisance. Finally he said:

"Surely the chief editor is informed about the customary procedure in such cases! How could you venture to turn up here to submit this matter to me? You couldn't really expect me to sign this...just so...simply like that...After all, a signature stands for the personality of an individual..."

"Exactly!" I replied.

"Certainly not! Under no circumstances! Only through the official channels", he retorted gruffly.

I went out, bought postage stamps, wrote my private address on the backside of the envelopes and popped them into the nearest letterbox.

Each one of the artists contacted soon sent me numerous reproductions, warm-hearted letters and interesting contributions for the journal.

The chief editor was praised for the first publication of detailed original contributions by "western" artists.

III - Lost Illusions

viii - Looking back - Looking Ahead

It couldn't be true! Almost a quarter of a million people were flooding the streets of East Berlin, carrying colourful posters inscribed: "Stasis into the factories!" "Down with the Disgraceful Wall!" and "Off with the Muzzle!"

There were imaginative and eloquent cartoons of the gentlemen, who had for decades been presented to the public with a halo and ideas, which more than one post-war generation had hardly dared to conceive or utter outside the most intimate circle, expressed in witty and sarcastic verses on large, colourful posters.

Suddenly a relaxed, cheerful, confident motley crowd was swarming in the streets around the Alexanderplatz, people watched from their windows or streamed out of their houses, looking for familiar faces, found friends and acquaintances by coincidence as they joined one of the groups moving past, which cordially accepted them, as like-minded friends; everyone felt within bonds of kinship, without strain, coercion, pressure, fear or suspicion, full of hope and optimism.

On the "other side" (of the Wall) there were open arms, melodramatic words of sympathy and welcome and magnanimous promises.

And hovering in the background, as yet invisible, there were wolves eagerly waiting to pounce on their prey.

Like rope-walkers balancing in lofty heights above an abyss, without a thought of the immanent danger of falling at any moment, masses of people with radiant faces were running from the ruins of

a great illusion towards an alluringly beautiful renewed Fata Morgana.

The rejoycing intensified, became louder and then, as the human avalanche surged through the Brandenburg Gate, all the accumulated relief, longing, hope and wrath exploded in a wild, roaring howl. Faces distorted in frenzy, voices yelling: "Wir sind das Volk" (we are the people) conjured up visions of scenes half a century before: seething crowds, a storm of voices shouting: "Ein Volk-ein Reich-ein Führer!" (one people-one Reich-one leader).

Then: "Sieg Heil!" (long live victory)

Then: "Kraft durch Freude!" (strength through joy)

Then: the fires of Auschwitz, Maidanek, Treblinka, Ravensbrück, Buchenwald and Mauthausen.

Then: the ruins of Dresden, Düsseldorf, Berlin...

ix -Half a Pound of Butter - or
a Human Destiny

Ruth, as a pensioner, was allowed to cross from East to West Berlin even before the Wall came down.

One day she set out to visit an old friend living in West Berlin. What would be the best thing to take along as a present, she was wondering; flowers? All very well - but the old lady was hardly managing to make ends meet on a very small pension, and Ruth had heard her speak of "good butter" as of something out of her reach, since she could only afford the cheapest sort of margarine. Ruth therefore decided to bring her half a pound of butter as a present.

At the check point Ruth joined a queue of waiting people: older men and women with bags and rucksacks, and a few younger people, evidently foreign tourists.

At last it was her turn.

A young police woman, plump, with empty, colourless eyes in a flabby, pale face, snub nose and greasy hair of undefinable colour protruding from under her cap on a low forehead, took Ruth's identity card into her shapeless hands - 'she bites her nails', Ruth thought as she felt the razor-sharp glance of the colourless eyes mustering her in a way, which could make the most innocent lamb feel like a culprit.

The policewoman wanted to inspect the content of Ruth's handbag. Ruth opened her bag.

"Oh no - you must unpack each article separately", said the policewoman.

Ruth unpacked each article separately and laid it out on the table before her. When she took out the butter, the policewoman barked:

"You can't take that with you! You should know that the export of food products is prohibited!"

"Yes...but...half a pound of butter...for a poor old lady..."

"That's against the law! The butter is confiscated! And you must follow me!"

Ruth was annoyed about the waste of time, but she had to follow the plump little representative of GDR law to a building behind her, along endless passages, upstairs, downstairs, into a badly lit, evil smelling room without windows. An elderly woman with a large bag and a helpless, anxious face was sitting on a wooden bench near the door. Ruth sat down beside her and waited. Time seemed to be standing still; Ruth began to feel hungry and thirsty - but that was not interesting to anyone in that building.

At long last Ruth heard her name called out of a loud speaker over the door.

The other woman gave a perplexed look and wanted to say something, but the impatient voice out of the loudspeaker instructed her to enter the room next door, where the policewoman with the bitten nails sat behind a heavy desk facing her.

Name, address, place and date of birth, names of father, mother, brothers and sisters, grandparents....Ruth gave monosyllabic, precise replies to the innumerable irrelevant questions.

What on earth did the Klokow Private High School, - the name seemed to be a problem to the policewoman - which Ruth had attended as a girl, have to do with the half-pound packet of butter?

An unusual human destiny was revealed in that bleak room of a police station, but the plump, colourless instrument of GDR law with the bitten finger nails only wrote, asked questions and had

no idea of that which was concealed behind all the curt replies: the fears, pains, tears, hopes, frustrations of a long, hard life.

Born in Berlin at the beginning of the twentieth century, in an art-loving, wealthy Jewish family; educated at the private high school, the name of which had to be repeated several times; after the seizure of power by the Nazis - emigration from Germany.

The toneless question of the policewoman:

"...emigration to where?"

"To Moscow".

This reply appeared to strike a chord somewhere inside this flabby-faced creature with the colourless eyes and bitten fingernails; for a moment she seemed to "straighten up", like a soldier during roll-call at the sound of his name...

Then: birth of a daughter.

Not mentioned was the avoidable death of the baby, due to a lack of medicines and competent treatment; not mentioned were the pain and tears of a mother, forced to look on helplessly as her baby dies; nor the birth of another daughter.

Next point: outbreak of the war and evacuation from Moscow to Siberia.

Not mentioned was the endless, tormenting journey to Siberia in an overcrowded train; the hunger and thirst; the woman with a child from whom Ruth's baby caught whooping-cough; not mentioned was the filth, the icy cold, the stink, and the faithful nurse, the Nyanya, who had not let Ruth go alone on that journey, and who was her only comfort and friend in all those terrible years.

Not mentioned was the arrival in the merciless Siberian winter in a remote village, where nobody wanted a German woman with a sick

baby, where nobody would employ her, and where she was condemned, as "non-working housewife", to live without a food rationing card, forced to exist for several years, together with her Nyanya and the small child, on cabbage and potatoes, which they were allowed to cultivate on a tiny patch of poor soil allocated to them.

Not mentioned was the fact that Ruth had to sell everything of value which she still possessed in order to obtain small amounts of food; and when everything that could be sold was gone, she exchanged the last bit of bread she could get hold of for milk for the child; that they had managed, after nights spent outside in the icy frost, to find an unheated small room in a miserable shack. To make the room slightly warm the two women, exhausted from hunger and cold, had to go to the forest to cut wood. In their threadbare, thin clothes they set out with a rickety cart and an even more rickety mare into the hostile arctic winter night.

With the utmost effort they made their way across snow and ice, dragging their cart and mare to the forest and back again over uneven, slippery frozen ground and deep snow. The wood was frozen hard as iron; cutting and then loading it on the cart demanded almost inhuman strength.

Not mentioned was the magnificent beauty of the Siberian winter landscape: the snow glittering in the golden sunlight of the short days, as though covered with countless diamonds; the ringing silence of the untouched wintry forest, occasionally interrupted by the cracking of branches when a bird or another animal rushed past; some of the snow weighing down the branches like a thick covering of icing sugar floated down to the white snow-carpet of

the earth, gleaming in the silvery, blueish moonlight. Wolves' eyes were peering like green lights in the dark forest, lurking for prey.

For the two freezing, exhausted women the beauty and greatness of the natural scenery, however, were only symptoms of hell.

The war was still raging in the west, when Ruth and the child were allowed to return to Moscow - without their faithful Nyanya; she had to stay behind. In many vain attempts Ruth had subsequently tried to find her.

Not mentioned were the following, lonely years in Moscow, in a damp basement room of 9 square metres in the company of rats, lice and bugs; and the work, found at last, with irregular hours by day and night, with the constant worry about the child, frequently left alone in that terrible room.

Finally - return to Germany.

The policewoman with her endless irrelevant questions could hardly have any idea of those post-war years, in which Ruth had lived in material security, but in an atmosphere of human indifference, more merciless and colder than the most severe Siberian frost. Ruth had few friends in Berlin, and as a result of an unhappy marriage she lived in social isolation.

But - that police station was hardly the place to speak about her private life.

"Can I go now?" Ruth finally asked after an endless interrogation. It was too late, of course, for the intended visit. And the butter she had wanted to give to the old lady had been confiscated.

So Ruth went home.

She had almost forgotten the whole affair, when, months later, a customs official rang her doorbell. He demanded a fine of 30

Marks for an infringement of GDR customs regulations: "unlicensed export of food products...."

Ruth had no cash in the house at that moment, and the man immediately began to mark out various objects for seizure on one of the coming days.

The sum was paid before the bailiff arrived.

The whole matter might sound rather ridiculous - but it was part of a very sad sequence of events with a tragic outcome. Abuse of power, stupidity, narrow-mindedness, bureaucracy on the part of people who had once had the courage to risk their life for a change of the relations of power, but who lacked the wisdom, far sight and strength of character and personality required to create a new and better system to replace the bad old one. They were unable to resist the temptations of corruption once they had established their own power.

One of the worst consequences was the domination of mediocrity. Many years have passed since that episode.

Ruth's sheltered childhood and youth under the protection of her family, her home, her parents have long since perished in the Holocaust.

Her daughter hardly gave her any warmth and comfort; like many mothers with a cruel fate, Ruth had spoilt her daughter, in self-denial and self-sacrifice granting her every wish in the striving to spare her all the pain and suffering she herself had to experience. As a result she had brought up a cold-hearted, moody egoist, who only waited to inherit something from her mother.

And then came the "Turning": the GDR was replaced by a united Germany with the most inhuman and brutal system of exploitation and a ruthless elbow-society.

Up to that point Ruth had hoped to be able to face old age at least in material security, after all the bitter experiences of her life.

She had a comfortable flat, the costs of living were payable, despite a number of shortages and despite the restriction of the freedom of expression, opinion and travel by means of senseless coercions, - most irritating to Ruth and to the GDR population as a whole - nobody needed to worry about housing rents, employment, education and training for youth, care in sickness and old age. The "new freedom" proved to be advantageous to all who had the money to pay for it, and to Nazi criminals, who had been prosecuted in the GDR, and who are now hardly punished for their crimes, with the police turning away or even joining in.

Ruth was suddenly confronted with an abyss: old and sick people had become "too expensive", a burden and it was hoped that they would die as quickly as possible.

In many nights the rough yelling of drunkards can be heard:

"Foreigners go to hell! Jews into the gas ovens!"

Walls are smeared with swastikas

In the newspapers politicians are quoted, who said:

"We don't need anti-fascists!"

And:

"East Germans are ungrateful!"

x - The Background

It was a clear autumn day in 1949.

Yellow and red leaves were silently drifting from the trees in the park around the benches and settled on the the hood of the pram Elisabeth was gently rocking with one hand, as she sat, enjoying the sunshine, reading, holding a book in the other hand. When she closed her book to see whether her little boy in the pram had gone to sleep, she saw Frau Müller, the wife of a workmate of her husband, whom he had brought to their home after work several times. The few glimpses she had caught of his wife had sufficed to leave an unfavourable impression. The only subject she had heard those people speak about was buying, selling and money.

The portly blonde dropped heavily on the bench with a sigh. With appraising envy her small, dark piercing bird's eyes mustered Elisabeth's silky fair hair, which lightly fell around her shoulders, her domed brow, small, straight nose, sensitive mouth and slim body in a blue dress which matched the colour of her gentle eyes. Elisabeth felt irritated by this obtrusive scrutiny. She cast a glance at the little girl in the pram and inquired about the age of the baby, who had woken up and began to whimper, to divert the woman's attention from herself. The women exchanged a few trivial remarks. Elisabeth was only half listening, but then suddenly pricked up her ears when Frau Müller said:

"I just can't understand why your husband should have joined the Party - he always emphasised that he was sick of politics and would

never again become involved with that sort of thing...Surely your husband had no need for such a move!"

"...What did you say? How do you mean that?"

Elisabeth could hardly believe her ears; she looked in astonishment into the other woman's lurking face.

"Well... I only thought ...because your husband was always against all kinds of politics; that's what my Heinz said, and he knows him well. He can't understand it either. And....excuse me saying so... your husband made good money as it was..."

'She must be crazy,' Elisabeth thought. She remembered how Hans had returned from the war disillusioned and embittered and swore never again to become caught up in politics, because he thought that all politics were in fact no more than unscrupulous deceit and a lot of dirty tricks; and now, all of a sudden, he was supposed to have...no -that just couldn't be true!

She was about to give an abrupt reply, but she restrained herself, eager to find out what was really behind Frau Müller's insinuations. Moreover, she did not want to create the impression that she knew less about her own husband than the wife of one of his workmates. So she said curtly: "Maybe Hans took that decision just because he was making good money!".

"Let's be honest," said Frau Müller, obviously disappointed that her words had not yielded the desired effect; "as soon as those up there notice someone who is respected by the others, they are immediately after him and try to lure him into their Party, with all sorts of big promises of career advancement and more pay..."

"That is not true!" Elisabeth exclaimed with indignation. "Hans is not corrupt!"

"Come, come," said Frau Müller with unconcealed malice, "you couldn't really be so naive - or are you just putting on a show because your husband is now one of them?! You know as well as I do that this is how it's done!"

Elisabeth hesitated for a moment, trying to find a fitting reply. Frau Müller took advantage of that moment and jabbered on:

"Do you really believe that most of those in the Nazi party up to the end of the war had fundamentally changed by now - within such a short time? Nowadays everyone is only interested to see on which side their bread is buttered! My father-in-law said last night that in '33 so many changed over night from red to brown, and in '45 from brown to red - always what's most convenient! When Heinz had his first bonus, they also tried their tricks on him - 'you're a worker - one of us' they said and invited him for a drink, 'today we, the workers are in power' and so on...but Heinz refused to listen to them."

"And why didn't he take the chance? He's always out for more money, isn't he?" Elisabeth interrupted Frau Müller's torrent of words with a significant glance.

"More money is all right", said Frau Müller, "....but not in that way! Besides - I would have put my foot down if Heinz had taken a decision, which would inevitably have meant that he would sit around every night at all sorts of meetings..."

"Better than in the pub, and in any case cheaper," Elisabeth snapped back.

When Elisabeth told Hans that evening, while they were having supper, about her encounter with Frau Müller in the park, she suddenly interrupted herself in the middle of a sentence.

Involuntarily she had caught sight, through the open door, of Hans' coat in the corridor. He had carelessly hung it up, so that the SED-badge under the lapel of the collar was showing.

That evening was the first time in their married life that Hans had been rude and coarse to his wife....

(From the novel: "Elisabeth; the Background")

xi- Symbols

An abandoned "Trabant" car stood by the roadside. It was night, the road was deserted. In the pale light of a lone street lamp the bubbles blinked, which splashed from the puddles in the persistent rain. The outline of a dog, like a ghostly shadow, darker than the inhospitable, bleak night, was moving around the car, snuffling around the front wheels in the vain search for traces of his master, who was far away.

A large, shining new Audi car was now standing outside the house in which he lived, together with a prettier, younger new wife - who hated dogs.

So one night both - the old car and the old dog - had simply been deposited by the side of a lonely road.

What had happened?

Dieter Schulz, not yet thirty, had great dreams. He wanted to change his life, just like life in the East of Germany had changed after the "Turning". Many people had similar dreams and intentions at that time. Every morning when he went to work he saw large containers outside the house where he lived, in Hellersdorf, on the outskirts of Berlin; those containers were overloaded with intact washing machines, refrigerators, televisions, pieces of furniture, curtains, clothes - all made in GDR, which had to make way for new "western" products. A young couple without much money could very well have set up a complete household with these things.

For Dieter Schulz the magnificent start into a new life included a new "image" - a new wife and a new car. Up to the break-down of the Berlin Wall, in GDR-times, Dieter Schulz had been known among his workmates as a "thousand percent Party Comrade "; among his demonstrations of Party-loyalty were the disciplinary proceedings against a critical workmate, Heinz B. as a result of his denunciation.

As soon as the "Turning" was within sight, Dieter demonstratively left the Party. When his factory was privatised, modernised and rationalised Dieter immediately kowtowed before the new bosses and proved to be a reliable informer and instrument. He was one of the few employed taken over by the new owners. He haughtily spoke of his former workmates, who were sacked, as lazy and incompetent.

At that time his first marriage broke up. After the divorce his wife had been awarded custody of the child and the flat; he had been awarded the car, the country house and the dog.

Dieter was very good at crawling before his superiors and kicking his inferiors. His bank account had rapidly increased. He took out a big loan, had his country cottage made into a permanent home, he bought a new car and very soon a new wife turned up.

Then the great collapse: the firm which had employed him went bankrupt. The new private owner had miscalculated his projects; everything was to soar up too quickly - and then rapidly went down the hill.

Dieter Schulz lost his job and became unemployed, sharing the fate of the majority of his former workmates at the time when his firm had been privatised.

The new car had to be sold, many of the new acquisitions obtained on hire-purchase, not yet paid off disappeared. The new wife did not like this turn of events, and she left him.

On the way to the social welfare office to apply for help in coping with his vast debts he suddenly remembered his old "Trabant"-car which he had deposited by the roadside one night.

And the dog? What had happened to the dog?

For the first time in his life Dieter Schulz for a few moments felt something like sympathy or pangs of conscience.

xii-An Intact World?

The other day during an outing to the woods on the outskirts of the city I came across the family who lives next door to me : father, mother, three children, and a little dog bravely running alongside their bicycles.

Every Saturday the engines of motorcycles and cars roared outside our house, as families loaded baskets, rugs and bags for their week-end drives to their country cottages, gardens or for picknicks in the woods and near the lakes in the environment.

The Meiers could be seen regularly at week-ends starting for their cycling tour, regardless of the weather. Always cheerful and friendly, they created the impression of a harmonious and happy family.

When I met them that sunny Sunday morning I recognised their voices and the barking of the dog from afar as they were coming in my direction. The children on their folding bicycles in front, chattering and giggling, the handle-bars glittering in the sunlight, followed by their parents, cheerfully talking and laughing. Obviously these two still had something to say to each other; they lived together in a community, not like so many couples after years of marriage, who simply lived side by side in a daily routine.

An intact world?

Some say that such a thing still exists in a few cases; the Meiers were obviously one such rare example.

We had lived door to door for many years. I could ring their doorbell at any time - and they could always come to me. Mr. Meier was a teacher, his wife the head of an after-school day centre for children. The walls of their living room were covered with books, from floor to ceiling. Books also framed the polished brown piano, on which I often heard one of the children practise. The eldest girl played quite well. Her younger sister played the guitar and sang, and their youngest brother played the recorder. All three children went to the music school. Once I was invited to a concert there.

The Meier-children were a rare exception among the numerous children in our housing area, who wildly rushed about, yelling, fighting, smearing on the walls, smashing glass doors and damaging lifts.

Most of these youngsters felt unwanted by their families, as a nuisance in the way of the adults. Many had keys on a string around their neck. In the evenings, above all on long winter evenings, young people would loiter around the house entrance, in the hall with our letter-boxes and the office of the caretaker, closed at that time, where it is warm and spacious.

Tenants hasten past these noisy and frequently aggressive hordes. Often one of the children on our floor can be heard banging on the door. Occasionally I took in one of the boys of a neighbour for a snack and a chat.

"Mother's in bed asleep, she and the old man were so boozy last night that they didn't even undress and they haven't woken up yet", he said.

One day the boy had disappeared. Then I received a letter from him from an approved school for juvenile delinquents.

There was never any noise coming from the Meiers' flat, only music or cheerful voices when the door was opened. Often appetising smells penetrated through their door; and at the week-end they set out with their bicycles.

All this, however, seems to have been long ago.

The "Turning" came; the children no longer moved about with cheerful faces.

The music school? Too expensive since it was privatised. The childrens' after-school centre where Mrs. Meier had worked was gone; a video-tape library had taken its place.

Mrs. Meier was unemployed. Her husband also lost his job.

When I recently met Mrs. Meier in the lift, she said: "We have to move...the rent has become too high."

She also told me that they had to sell the bicycles; "we got quite a good price for them...and nowadays every penny counts.."

She was looking for a job, "I don't care what kind of work...I would even go as a cleaner...anything is better than being unemployed."

Her son sold newspapers at the week-end, the girls helped an acquaintance of the family in her flower stand, but they could still hardly make ends meet.

A few days later, when I left home early in the morning, to go to the doctor, I saw two men carry a corpse on a stretcher out of the house.

Mr. Meier had slashed his wrists during the night.

xiii--The Losers

The cashier in the supermarket cast a brief glance at the queue which became longer and longer as a voluminous, rather slovenly woman emanating an odour of sweat before me in the line at the cash box took out an endless quantity of goods from her trolley. I knew the woman by sight. Evidently the cashier knew her as well.

"Are you shopping for the whole town today, Frau Berthold?" she inquired.

"Looks like it, doesn't it?" the woman replied, "but I now have two more mouths to feed!"

That same day I was informed about the circumstances connected with that remark.

I had hardly returned from shopping, when the collector of the "Volkssolidarität" (old age assistance), Frau Lehmann, rang my doorbell.

I gave her my contribution and, as usual, she stayed for a cup of coffee.

Frau Lehmann was sociable and chatty, and she lost no time telling me the "latest local news".

"Do you know", she said, "last night Max Eisenberg jumped out of the window! He's the one living with his two girls in the Bertholds' flat on the eleventh floor. They say he was dead immediately. Poor man -he was always unlucky in his life.."

Frau Lehmann seemed to know everything about everybody.

Max Eisenberg's parents had survived Nazi concentration camps but died shortly after the end of the war. One of his mother's sisters had cared for the orphaned boy, who was a conscientious hard worker, good-natured, popular and respected. He had married a pretty young woman, who worked as a hairdresser. They had two girls and lived in the house next door to ours, but soon after the "Turning" the wife had died of cancer, and Max was left alone with the two girls. One misfortune never comes alone; very soon Max had lost his job - his place of work was taken over by a private employer from West Germany, and most of the East Berliners employed there before were sacked. The rent of his flat increased five times over night, and he had to borrow money so that he and his children should not become homeless.

His parents-in-law were living in an old age home on the outskirts of the city. After the death of his wife Max not only had to care for his children, but also for his aged parents-in-law, who had no other relatives.

Max ploughed through the newspaper columns advertising vacancies, he ran about, telephoned and wrote letters of application, but at the age of 42 he was "too old" to find other employment. Worried about the future, Max could not sleep at night.

"He looked quite miserable and ill these past few weeks", Frau Lehmann added.

His debts increased alarmingly; he had to give up his telephone and newspaper subscriptions, and in the end he could not find the money to pay the rent.

"At that time", said Frau Lehmann, "the Berthold woman had taken him and the girls in as sub-tenants, so at least he didn't have to pay so much rent. You can say what you like about that woman - but she has a warm heart, she gives help wherever she can.

Max had not lived there long, when he got an official letter - I was collecting my mail just when he took that letter out of his mail-box. He opened it, his hands were shaking and his face grew white as wax. He was informed that, since he was the only relative of his parents-in-law, he was responsible for them, and unless he paid a huge sum for their maintenance, the old age home would not keep them. The sum had gone up from 165 to over 2000 DM! That probably gave him the rest..."

Frau Lehmann was also informed about Frau Berthold. Her husband, she said, had left the family long ago. "He was a terrible drunkard, but the woman always managed to find ways of keeping up the household with so many children. She didn't look after herself and the flat was in a state...and in the end she could hardly make ends meet, despite all the welfare assistance she got as a single mother of six kids, and so she had to sub-let. When Max and his girls moved in it was good for all concerned, but finally the worry about his parents-in-law was the last blow - and then he cracked up...And the Berthold woman now has to feed two more kids, beside her own six. 'What can I do', she said to me, 'I can't throw them out, can I? And then, they've become part of my family!'

I don't know how she manages, with hardly enough for her own lot!"

xiv -Chat under an umbrella

"Erich, Erich! Say something, Erich!"

Frieda Schulze had found her husband in the kitchen, lifeless, sunk in his chair in front of the running television. His hand was gripping a sheet of paper: Frieda recognised the letter from the old age home, where her father-in-law had lived for years; it contained information that had caused her sleepless nights, and she had not dared to show it to her husband, although the letter was addressed to him..

"...the costs for the keep of your fatherwill henceforth have to be covered by yourself, according to the present regulations. If you should be unable to make these payments, your closest relatives shall be held responsible...the social welfare authorities shall only cover these costs, if there is substantiated evidence of their insolvency..."

"Erich!", Frieda exclaimed desperately, "please, please say something!"

She embraced the lifeless body and her tears streamed over his pale face.

"Frieda...he can't say anything more!"

Else Hartmann, her next door neighbour ever since she had moved into the house with Erich and her two children more than forty years ~~before~~, had followed Frieda into the spacious, cosy kitchen, where Erich Schulze had spent most of his time since he had retired from work three years before.

"Friedchen, Friedchen....calm yourself, my dear," Else tried to comfort her weeping friend, herself shocked by this unexpected discovery.

"I'll go down to the telephone box around the corner, to ring up doctor Jäger, I'll be back in a few minutes," Else said and hastened downstairs.

"Sauwetter" (awful weather) was printed in large letters on their umbrellas. Else had a red one and Frieda a green one; they had bought the umbrellas from a street peddler just outside the old age home, where Frieda's father-in-law had been accommodated for several years, and where they had regularly visited him. All was well until that letter had arrived, in which his continued stay there would no longer be guaranteed, unless the vast sum of money demanded ever since the "Turning" was regularly paid.

What would happen next?

After several sleepless nights Frieda had decided to go to the old age home to explain her situation and that of her family. She had asked Else to go with her.

At the old age home, where they knew Frieda, they showed sympathy for her situation, but they could do nothing to help; they advised her to go to the social welfare office - and there they had simply made reference to the new valid regulations.

And now the two women were on their way back home, waiting for a bus.

"That bus should have been here long ago", a man with a moustache, a small attaché-case in one hand and a large, black umbrella in the other grumbled. He cast a nervous glance at the clock outside the suburban line station on the opposite side of the road.

"We have to pay more and more money - but bus services are more irregular and unreliable than ever!"

The inscription on the umbrellas of the two women was appropriate: it was pouring with rain. Sluggishly, like liquid lead the water of the Spree was flowing under the Jannowitz-Bridge, which trembled as though shaken by a remote earthquake from the continuous stream of cars and heavy trucks thundering across it. Outside the station opposite Vietnamese men and women were selling cigarettes and newspapers. A dripping wet Vietnamese was running across the road with a pack of newspapers, hoping to sell a few copies at the bus stop. A youth, whose soaked Jeans-suit stuck to his body bought a paper. A stout woman with a bulging shopping bag, under an umbrella with a flower-pattern looked askance at the paper and said: "Nothing but wars, violence, murders...I can't read the papers anymore nowadays! At night I'm afraid to go out, with so many brutal criminals about, and the police not doing anything effective! On top of it all, criminals are hardly punished... ridiculously mild sentences, mostly only on probation, they're not impressed and cheerfully go on killing, robbing assaulting and setting fires...while we are expected to pay constantly rising taxes...I wonder whether that bus will ever come!"

Everybody was stretching out their necks to look out for the bus, which was nowhere within sight.

"You must go to the social welfare office again, Frieda", said Else, "You can't just cry and accept everything! I'll come with you. Today the weather is bad, so we'll go home now - but you must go again and tell them that you and Erich both have bad legs, that you live on the third floor in two rooms, with an outside-lavatory!"

"So what!" Frieda replied in angry resignation, "they wouldn't care two hoots about us! All they're interested in is money....Old folks bring nothing, they're just a burden and they should kick off as quickly as possible. And we were the ones who pulled the cart out of the muck in '45!"

"True enough," Else agreed, "we're only expected to pay for everything. I'd like to see some of those chaps high up in the government with ten thousand and more DM a month manage on our small pensions! On top of that - they don't have to pay taxes nor rents...But - couldn't one of your children take Grandpa, Frieda? After all - they're younger, they have more space, running hot water, central heating, bathroom and toilet in their flats..."

"How on earth should they manage, Else? Up to now they still have work - thank goodness - even if it's badly paid..but who could say how much longer before they lose their jobs, like so many others, also young and skilled...Before noone needed to worry about such things, there was always a shortage of labour! But now? Nothing is secure today. Now it's: because you're poor you must die sooner..And our kids come home exhausted late at night, they hardly have the time and energy to care for their household and family! And their kids don't have their clubs, sports and even the library is closed...no money...How do you think should Anneliese

and Manfred find the time, energies and money to take care of Grandpa as well? And they couldn't use up their bit of savings - it wouldn't be enough to pay for the home at any rate...they need every penny in these insecure times.."

"But we mustn't give up, Friedchen! What does Erich think of it all?"

"Well... to tell the truth - he knows nothing yet. I haven't dared to give him the letter, because he always get so excited, and you know... his heart..."

"If you'll excuse me butting in", said the woman under the flower-patterned umbrella, "I always say that we never knew how much better off we were in the past! Of course there was a lot to criticise - but I don't think you'd find paradise on earth anywhere...and what we're in for now is ten times worse!Why do we have to pay so much for social insurance, if everything costs extra money??I just spent 20 DM at the chemists'on prescribed medicines which I would have got free of charge before!Everything, including treatment, hospital, drugs and even cures were covered by our insurance contributions!We were a lot of damned idiots to have believed all the promises of Herr Kohl! "Noone was to be worse off" -I ask you!"

"And old people like us are unwanted, they hope we'll kick off as quickly as possible", said Frieda, "and it was our generation who pulled the cart out of the mud in '45....Catch me going to the polls at the next elections...the whole lot of them are all a heap of crooks, they talk and talk, and the country's going downhill all the time.."

"Grandpa must stay where he is," Else insisted, "We must find a way, Friedchen, we mustn't just give in and accept everything, that will just make it worse."

"I'll first have to break the news to Erich, Else...and I need your help; come up for a cup of coffee, and then..."

At long last - there was the bus.

Everybody closed their umbrellas, shook them and got on the bus.

"Hurry up, you people", said the bus driver.

"Come, come now", said the man with the attaché-case, "we waited long enough in the rain, while you're sitting here in the dry in this damned weather!"

Frieda and Else climbed up the steep stairs to the third floor, panting and puffing.

"That stupid key.. always in the furthest corner of my bag", said Frieda when they finally stood outside the door of her flat.

She opened the door, followed by Else.

On the threshold of the kitchen she stopped and held her breath...

Dr. Jäger could only confirm the death of Erich Schulze, Else said to the caretaker of the house when he had assisted her in clearing up the flat of the Schulze's; Frieda died a short time after her husband.

"Heart failure", Dr. Jäger had said to her daughter; "she was completely exhausted..."

xv - Neo-German Justice

Ali Hikmet was desperate. Nobody would believe him. His only crime consisted in the fact, that he, as a Turk, was living in the German Constitutional democratic state; quite legally, for several years. His little green grocer's shop was always clean and neat, Ali was popular among his customers, he did not owe money to anyone, his products were always fresh and impeccable. Ali had hoped to be able to breathe freely after the oppression and misery he had experienced in his own country, and at last to have a chance to offer a future to his children and to live a normal life worthy of human dignity in Germany.

For a few years it seemed as though his hopes had, in fact, been fulfilled. Honest, hard-working and friendly, Ali had managed well in Berlin-Kreuzberg, where he had many friends, not only Turks, but also Germans. - up to that fatal sunny spring morning, which had begun so peacefully and found such a tragic end.

"Snowball" was the name his children had given to the little white dog which Ali had taken for a walk that Sunday morning in the park near his home.

Everything was just as on every other Sunday morning; children playing in the park; mothers sitting on benches, chatting, rocking prams; men concealed behind a newspaper, shrouded in a cloud of cigarette, pipe or cigar smoke; older people with walking sticks; couples with their children walking past, and "Snowball" barking in protest, because he had to follow his master holding the lead, and not letting him chase after the ball of playing children, or a rabbit in the bushes.

Suddenly Ali felt a blow on his head. A sharp pain struck him like lightening and a warm stream of blood ran over his face. He wanted to turn round to see what was happening, but he was beaten again and thrown on the ground. A horde of drunk, bawling youths, stinking of alcohol, hardly older than schoolboys, with bald heads and red, bloated faces were kicking and beating Ali, yelling, insulting and jeering at their victim.

"You Turkish swine", a small, sturdy skinhead aged about fifteen, with glassy, bloodshot eyes shouted, "go home, get out! We don't want you here!"

Ali tried to protect his head and face against the hail of blows from all sides. His last thought, before he became lost consciousness was of "Snowball".

"My dog...my dog..." he called, but his voice was drowned by the wild shrieks and curses of his attackers. "Snowball", scared and excited, had torn himself from the lead and attempted to defend his master. He bit one of the rowdies in his leg; the boy howled with pain and kicked the dog, which instinctively ran home; the house was only a few yards away.

Barking loudly, "Snowball" ran up the stairs, where he met little Mehmet, Ali's youngest son.

"My god, "Snowball"...what happened? Where's daddy?"

The small dark haired boy took the trembling, disheveled animal into his arms, stroking it and carrying it to the flat.

"Mummy - look! He came by himself", Mehmet said.

Aishe, Ali's young wife, came to the door. She looked at the dog, and her beautiful, dark-skinned face with large black eyes was troubled by a frightened and worried look. So many times terrible things had happened in this area in recent weeks; she had a feeling of bad foreboding.

"Stay here," she said, "I must find out what happened to daddy".

She knew that Ali had only wanted to take the dog for a short walk to the park, and she expected him to be back for lunch at any minute. She wondered why he was away so long.

She ran out of the house. On the way to the park she met a neighbour.

"Frau Hikmet, Frau Hikmet," the woman called as she ran towards her, "something must have happened to your husband, I saw an ambulance taking him away!"

"Do you know where to?"

The woman did not know.

Aishe went to a telephone box and called the nearest hospital. She managed to find out that a man of her husband's name had in fact been delivered to the emergency ward a short time ago.

Aishe hurried back home, where she had left Mehmet and the dog. She took both of them to a neighbour, whom she told what had happened.

"I must quickly go to see him," she said to the neighbour, who took in the boy and the dog and promised to give the lunch Aishe

had prepared to him and the other two children when they came home.

"Sorry, I'm not allowed to let anyone see him", said the little red-haired, snub-nosed nurse with friendly brown eyes and freckles at the hospital reception.

"But...I'm his wife!" said Aishe.

"I really can't let you see him, I'm terribly sorry" said the nurse, and Aishe believed that she really meant what she said.

"Can I wait until a doctor comes, and ask him what happened to my husband?"

The nurse had no objections, and Aishe sat down to wait.

She anxiously looked at the clock over the entrance door as one hour after another went by, until at last a young doctor appeared; very tall, slim, with a cold, expressionless face and colourless eyes behind rimless spectacles, he looked down at the frail woman with a pale face and large, dark eyes under a black head-scarf.

"Excuse me please," Aishe said, rising from the chair and going towards the man in the white overall, "I'm Aishe Hikmet, my husband, Ali Hikmet, I was told, is here - I don't know what happened to him, but I must see him!"

"I can't let you see him", said the doctor snarled in a grating, toneless voice, "he's not responsive. That's all I can say."

He brushed her aside and quickly went down the long corridore. "But....what am I to do now?"

The little nurse looked at Aishe in helpless resignation.

"You'd best go home and ring here in the morning, maybe they can tell you more by then."

Aishe went home. The neighbour was probably impatient, having looked after the children and the dog for so long.

"My god...how can I face the night without knowing how he is and what happened to him?" she said to herself.

Ali was deeply unconscious. On the bed next to him a drunkard was throwing himself about, muttering incoherent words and emanating a pungent smell of alcohol and sweat. A police patrol had picked him up in the night, when he had molested a man waiting at a bus stop. Ali was not aware of his neighbour and knew nothing about him. A male attendant entered the ward, together with a policeman and the young doctor, who had so heartlessly dealt with Aishe the day before.

"Those bloody foreigners", the policeman grunted with a sigh, "nothing but bother with them! Fighting with youngsters in the park in broad daylight....and we can patch him up here....and pay the costs!"

The policeman had no doubt that this foreigner was guilty and had caused his own trouble - although there was absolutely no evidence to substantiate that assumption, and although he knew nothing about the circumstances of the case. To the policeman only the foreigner could be guilty.

"When he comes to you can question him", said the doctor. He looked briefly at Ali and added: "you won't get much out of him while he's in this state."

It was still dark when Ali regained consciousness. The stench of alcohol and sweat and the loud snoring of his neighbour filled the room. The moon cast a ghostly light on the bare white walls of the ward, but Ali felt that his field of vision was limited. 'No wonder', he thought, 'the eye is bandaged, of course I can't see with it', he thought. He felt a burning pain in the bandaged eye and a piercing headache. He closed his eyes and tried to order his thoughts. Up to the moment when he had lost consciousness he could still remember - but everything else was blotted out of his memory. He had no idea how he had come to the bed in this room. What would happen now? How could Aishe cope with the household, the children, the shop, the dog? He could not leave her alone with all these burdens! His only wish was to get away from that place, as quickly as possible.

Somewhere outside a churchbell chimed four times and then another three times.

Ali could find no peace; the pain, all the questions about the past, the present and the future tormented him. Four chimes...and another four...and then he must have dropped off again, because he was brutally torn out of heavy sleep. Meanwhile a new day had begun.

"Hey, you! Wake up...d'you hear me? Get out of that bed, " Ali heard a barking voice next to his bed.

"Come on, come on! Get a move on! Get up and get dressed, will you! This isn't a luxury hotel!"

The piercing and hammering pain in his head when Ali tried to sit up was unbearable, and he fell back limply onto his pillow.

"Can't you hear what I said?" the policeman bawled.

"But...don't you see.... he can't get up!" said the attendant with some hesitation.

"Of course he can - and he will get up! Give him a kick, will you! I have to write a report, so I must question him first, but I haven't much time. Let him get dressed quickly and take him next door to the office!"

Ali groaned with the pain all over his body. He felt giddy, his legs gave way, as if they were made of cotton wool, and the attendant had to muster all his strength to drag Ali along.

"Why the hell did you have to fight with those boys? And that on a Sunday morning, in the park! You'll have to expect a trial and a prison sentence!" said the policeman.

Ali wanted to explain that he had only been out with his dog, when he had suddenly been attacked by those drunken rowdies - but he could do no more than murmur a few unintelligible words. The barking voice of the policeman came to him as though through a wall. At that point he was indifferent to everything, all he wanted was to be left in peace....

Ali was still benumbed when the hospital dismissed him; Aishe, with eyes swollen and red from crying had taken him home.

Gradually she told him what had happened; and that an eyewitness of the event had come forward; that this person had come to her and indignantly told her that the police had practically thrown him out and threatened him with punishment in case he insisted on interfering in a matter which was none of his business; and that the police was convinced that everything was only Ali's fault and they refused to hear any evidence of the truth.

Soon afterwards there was a brief court hearing. Ali felt as helpless as an unarmed individual before an approaching heavy tank.

The verdict was preconceived from the start: Ali, the victim, was condemned as the culprit.

He was obliged to pay for the costs of the hospital and the court proceedings.

Weeks of excitement and agitation followed, with passionate angry discussions among Ali's friends and acquaintances - in the house, in the street. Ali never realised how many friends he had. They repeatedly lobbied the police and several public authorities; all these people, most of them poor, collected money to pay all costs and even for bail, so that the innocent Ali should not have to go to jail on top of everything else.

In several backyards of the street inhabitants of the housing area had gathered to talk about this case of hairraising injustice. Finally a deputation had been nominated to go to the Town Hall to protest against this disgraceful scandal. Yet the deputation never got as far as the Mayor; they were barred from entering the

building. When they voiced their indignation, they were threatened with prosecution for vandalism.

In the meantime Aishe had taken charge of the shop and managed with astounding efficiency. Ali's sister had come to Berlin from Dresden, where she had been living for several years. She took care of the household and the children.

On the one hand Ali was full of wrath about the injustice he had experienced; on the other hand he was even more moved by the warmhearted, generous support and solidarity which so many ordinary people had shown him - among them many whom he did not personally know.

Only - he had lost the sight of his left eye, and the tormenting headache also persisted.

One of his customers even tried to obtain a renewed trial and payment of compensation for his injuries.

Unfortunately in vain.

The investigation of the case had soon stopped - if indeed it had ever been started.

Why so much fuss about an insignificant little Turkish greengrocer?

Neo-German justice - that's what it is....

xvi - Blessing in Disguise

Anna Behnke was born in 1911, in a small basement flat in Berlin, Prenzlauer Berg. Her father, Max-Dietrich, provided for his family by repairing boots and shoes, while Mother Rieke had all hands full coping with her household, her family with six children and the small business. Immediately after the outbreak of World War I Max-Dietrich was called up to the army; in the second year of the war Mother Rieke received the news of her husband's death in the trenches.

The shop had to be sold and Mother Rieke had to do the washing for wealthy tenants in the front-building to be able to survive with her children. Anna's older sisters had to start working as soon as they had finished the elementary school; the eldest sister, Wally, went cleaning in Frau Meier's flat in the front-building; Lottchen, two years older than Anna, helped out in the grocery round the corner. The three boys were still at school, but 10-year old Jörg had to deliver newspapers before going to school in the morning -and was scolded by the school teacher, because he often dropped off to sleep during lessons. The two youngest boys were always eager to be charged with small jobs by neighbours to earn a few pence for sweets. Anna, at the age of 14, was apprenticed as a seamstress immediately on leaving the elementary school. Mother Rieke had done the washing, cleaning and shopping and on many occasions also the cooking for the wealthy family von Ebersbach, and Frau von Ebersbach had found the apprenticeship for Anna.

Hard-working, neat and friendly, Anna was appreciated by her employer. His son Willi fell in love with her and they soon got married.

It was a happy marriage. Fifty-five long years Anna and Willi made their way together in a life which was not always easy.

Willi had to go to the front in World War II, just as Anna's father had to serve in the army of World War I. Willi, however, survived and came back home, where his wife had faithfully waited for him. Anna, Willi, their three daughters and three sons lived modestly but happily - up to the year 1986, when Willi fell sick with cancer and died a few months later.

More than 60 years had passed since Anna had first moved into the flat in the Sredzkistrasse in Prenzlauer Berg in 1930, when she and Willi had saved up a little money. The flat had two very large rooms, a spacious kitchen, a long corridor and a toilet - a luxury in the back-buildings of that area, where most toilets were on the landing outside the flats; Willi had installed a hot water boiler and a shower cabin in the kitchen. One of the rooms they had divided by a curtain for the boys and girls, and the family life during all the long years had mainly taken place in the large, cosy living-room kitchen.

The tenants of the house had been like a large family. Of course there were differences here and there, but never dramatic.

Basically everybody was on the spot wherever help and advice were needed, they dropped in to the neighbours for a cup of coffee, they borrowed sugar, beer, butter and other things they had forgotten to buy, when there were parties or festivities, such as weddings of one of the younger tenants, they helped one another out with chairs and dishes.

In the course of the years, however, several tenants had died, others had moved away, new tenants had appeared, and the oldest tenants, such as the Behnkes had melted down to a small "stock".

After Anna's children had left, and especially after Willi had died, that "stock" had become Anna's main comfort and support.

On that day, not long after the "Turning", a number of the old "stock", by that time of a venerable age, had gathered in Anna's kitchen. The house had been taken over from the municipal housing administration by a private owner. He had made claims as the "original owner". Anna and her friends, however, knew very well that this "gentleman" had bought the house practically for nothing in 1934, after the real owner, a Jew, had been deported and was never heard of again. In the early Fifties he had gone to West Germany, and now he demanded the return of "his" property, confiscated when he had "gone West". After he had taken over, the rent had shot up over night by 400 per cent. The old people could not pay that high rent out of their small pensions.

"And now I'll have to get out, after more than half a century and at the age of 81", Anna said. "Where could I go to? I can't sew for extra money with my aching hands..."

Delicate and small, with thin grey hair combed back from her wrinkled brow Anna sat at her kitchen table, her head bowed and her work-worn hands on her lap. Only her clear grey eyes and the small, well shaped face indicated that this woman must once have been pretty. Fritze Lehmann, a tall, broad-shouldered man with a tonsure of grey hair, slightly bulging, kindly brown eyes and a stately beer-belly sat at the other end of the table, smoking a

pipe and thoughtfully sipped his coffee. The pendulum of the clock on the wall behind him swung to and fro and the ticking of the clock enhanced the cosy comfort of the kitchen. An imposing lampshade with a flower pattern and a long fringe throned above the large old table, around which the old folks had gathered. Shelves for pots, pans, crockery and cookery books, which Willi had fixed to the wall with faded wall paper were beside a bulky peasant cupboard they had bought years ago at a village fair while on one of their rare holidays. A fire was crackling in the large kitchen range beside a gas cooking stove, spreading pleasant warmth in the room. An icy wind was blowing outside, wet snowflakes were dancing outside the window, floating to the ground and forming puddles on the road pavement. Anna had hung blankets in front of the windows to keep out some of the cold draught blowing in. The windowframes had been gradually rotting away for years, the putty had crumbled, and the municipal housing administration had repeatedly promised the tenants new double windows.

"The new owner will have the windows repaired, but then the rent will go up even more", Ida Schwandtke, another neighbour of the old stock observed; she was about the same age as Anna, only in contrast to her heavy and voluminous, with a grey bun of hair and a double-chin which wobbled like a jelly pudding when she spoke. She had a jovial face with lively light eyes, which, at that moment had a rather gloomy expression.

All three of them had remained alone after the death of their spouses. Their children were living far away, all of them were overburdened by work, household and family chores. The old people

all had to manage on minimal pensions which hardly allowed them to provide for the basic requirements of subsistence after decades of backbreaking work.

"They say we could go to the welfare office to apply for a rent allowance," said Fritze, "but catch me going begging, filling in mountains of forms, sitting around on long corridors for hours for a few Marks...not me! All my life I did hard and honest work, never owed a penny to anyone and never got anything for nothing!"

"I read in the paper that urgent repairs, like our rotten windows, can't increase our rent," said Ida Schwandtke.

"You try and make that clear to our new landlord", Anna retorted, "he'll give you the right answer!"

"Never mind what he thinks or says, we must try, at any rate! After all, we can't put up with everything and we won't let them chuck us out of after all the years we've lived here", Ida exclaimed indignantly.

"Quite right", Fritze agreed, "we really should try".

"In our house most people are younger, many still have work, maybe they could pay the increased rent - and they don't care two hoots about us old folks", Anna said, "but the other wings of the building are also part of our house, and I know that there are more pensioners, families with several kids and I know quite a few of them who're unemployed...We should get in touch with them! My old man always used to say: 'alone you're nothing - if we all stick together we could achieve a lot.'"

"If all those who had been against Hitler had stuck together and formed a united front against the Nazis in '33 instead of all the squabbling within their own ranks - maybe we could have been spared old Adolf and the whole nightmare of the war," Fritz grunted, "...and all those millions of dead", Anna added, "but people today are just as stupid as they were then, they haven't learnt anything from the past.."

"Left or right...I don't give a damn" Ida said, "I only know that I don't want to become part of all those hundreds of thousands who lost the roof over their heads because they couldn't afford to pay the increased rents."

"There's Dr. Krüger in the house nextdoor", Anna said, "he's a lawyer and I know he helped several people living in this area who got into trouble. Maybe he would help us as well!"

"How?" Ida was wondering.

"He knows all the laws and paragraphs", Fritz replied, "maybe the new landlord really has no right to screw up the rent if he has the windows repaired."

Anna had become more confident when she realised that she was not left alone in her plight. That feeling encouraged her. That day a plan of action was forged in Anna's kitchen. The following day Fritze, Anna and Ida went to see several tenants in the neighbouring wing, of whom they knew that they had similar problems as their own. Harry Schmidt, father of 6 children, at the time without a job, immediately supported the idea of taking action against the new landlord.

"If we let them do as they like without protest, they'll go on dancing on our heads and things will only get worse", he said. He suggested that they should ask Dr. Krüger for advice, and that they should write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper.

Dr. Krüger confirmed that the repair of the windows was by no means a "modernisation measure", and the landlord had no right to put up the rents on that account - but the rent had already been increased to a sum which the pensioners, the unemployed and many working in badly paid jobs simply could not afford to pay - even with social welfare assistance.

Anna, Ida and a Frau Beck from one of the side wings had an idea: they wanted to organise a neighbourhood-assistance group.

Everybody would be asked to contribute to a joint fund for mutual emergency assistance. The idea caught fire immediately. Some wanted joint sponsorship for a weekly shopping-basket and cheap lunches. This would help all participants to save a lot of money. The assistance fund was intended to help those who had got into trouble without any fault of their own. A local fun fair was arranged, with a raffle (first prize: a huge delicious cake produced by Anna), and a fortune-teller; Ida took charge of that function with great skill. She sat in a tent made from blankets in the light of a concealed torch, shrouded in a cloth of exotic colours, and pronounced her enigmatic oracles in a dramatically foreboding, deep voice. She proved to be the main attraction, people were queueing outside her tent, and her collecting box was quickly overflowing.

People flocked to the backyard of Anna's house from all the surrounding tenements and from the entire street. Many offered

their services for the mutual assistance efforts, and all were enthusiastic about the project of fighting against brutal rent usury and deceit, helping each other in the endeavour to resist against all attempts to chase them out of their homes.

The letter to the editor soon appeared in the local paper. The news of the activities had spread like wildfire, and then a very friendly, committed reporter of the paper looked up Anna to collect more information about the situation.

At Christmas Anna's kitchen was bursting full of participants in the mutual assistance campaign.

The blankets had been removed from the windows, because the new double windows kept out cold, rain and wind.

Anna's children had read the letter to the editor in the paper. On Christmas eve they were all together in Anna's kitchen.

"Why didn't you ever say a word?" they all asked indignantly. "We would never have let you be chucked out of here because you couldn't pay the rent!"

"You know me, my dears....I've always had my pride," said Anna, "and besides...you see that I'm not alone..."

- xvii - Karl Hansen's Legacy

He woke up in hospital. Gradually he became aware of his surroundings. The slightest movement caused intense pain all over his body. His head and arms were bandaged. What had happened? How did he get to this place? He tried to remember.

In the effort to sort out his thoughts however, everything around him once again submerged in black nothingness. And then scenes of a time in his remote past emerged before his mind's eye.

A blow of the fist of his despotic father, intended for his gentle wife had landed in the face of the youth aged fifteen that Karl had been at the time, when he had tried to defend his mother and sister. Soon afterwards he had left his father's house for ever.

That scene suddenly came to life within him. He acutely felt the burning pain, the humiliation, the anger and resentment...

In those days - it was the year 1928, on the eve of the great world economic crisis - Karl Hansen was a tall, slender youth, nimble and agile in his movements. His fair, straight hair with a side parting fell loosely around his shapely head. In spite of teenage pimples Karl was attractive: the somewhat edgy, square-shaped face, with a straight nose and serious almond-shaped, grey eyes under bushy brows, slightly darker than his hair, was softened by a sensitive mouth and a dimple in his chin.

His father, accountant in a large firm of coffee importers, had survived the First World War unscathed, as a devoted officer in the imperial German army. Karl had inherited his father's good looks, but his upright, generous and ⁵⁰¹ courageous character was the

heritage of his mother's side of the family. His father displayed impeccable manners to the outside, but in fact he was an unimaginative, narrow-minded and heartless domestic tyrant. He had married his wife, Maria, on account of her unusual beauty, and above all because of the respected position of her father, a priest and descendant of a wealthy family. That connection allowed him to return to his post after the end of the war. Thanks to his diligent, conscientious work, and especially thanks to his wife's skilful household management his family managed to attain a status of modest prosperity, yet his soul was constantly tormented by the frustrated ambition to ascend to social and material wealth and power. In his firm, however, he always remained a small, insignificant accountant.

Karl had just completed the elementary school at the time of the conflict with his despotic father, which caused him to leave his family. Neither his mother's imploring plea nor her tears, nor his father's merciless assurance that he would not give his son any support whatsoever could move him to change his decision.

A friend of his mother's family helped him to find a place of apprenticeship and subsequently employment as a printer. His older friend Philipp let him live in his small attic room. Under the influence of that friend young Karl Hansen joined the Social Democratic Party in the year of the world economic crisis in 1929.

The crisis ruined the firm which had employed his father. Although unemployed and in an extremely precarious situation, Otto Hansen firmly refused all contact with his son and also the modest assistance which Karl offered to his father. In those days his mother had supported her own family and that of her parents, who

had lost all their money in the crisis, by sewing and mending for her acquaintances. Her meagre income was slightly improved by the modest assistance which Karl gave her in secret meetings.

In his free time - mostly at night - Karl wrote articles for the Social Democratic and trade union press. Despite his youth, Karl recognised the fatal sectarianism and quarrels within the left-wing movement. At meetings, in his press contributions and in discussions with his workmates and party comrades he emphatically propagated the need for a united struggle by all those threatened by the economic crisis and the rising Nazis and other right-wing nationalist and extremist forces. Yet all he achieved in this effort was hostility among his own ranks.

All these things emerged in fragments within his mind, constantly interrupted by unconsciousness and weakness.

Again he felt the intense torment of painful blows; on the one hand the violence of the skinheads at the pub which he remembered as the last thing before he finally lost consciousness and his memory of the sequence of events broke up; but - how come that they all had the features of his father as he had seen him last, so many years ago? And then the blows were dealt by the SA-men who had arrested him in 1935, while he was printing anti-fascist leaflets in an underground printing shop; they had tried to beat names and addresses of comrades out of him, but all he did was to shout "No, I won't say anything!"

He thought he was shouting these words; in fact, his wife who sat beside his bed could hardly understand his indistinct murmur.

That night his wife had been about to bake a cake for Sunday afternoon. Karl had only wanted to slip out with a neighbour for a glass of beer in the pub around the corner.

"Don't stay too long!" his wife had called after him as he left the flat. "

"Don't you worry, my dear - you know that I'm a tough guy!" he had answered with a smile, putting his arm around her shoulder and kissing her on the forehead. Just at that moment his neighbour had called and the two old men had left together.

After she had received the call from the hospital Ilse had turned off the stove and immediately rushed off to see him.

She was shocked when she found Karl, motionless, with a bandaged head in a hospital bed.

She did not know how long she had sat beside him, crying bitterly, desperately trying to discover a sign a life in him. At last he had opened his eyes and they had helplessly looked at each other.

Yet it was only a brief moment before Karl again sank into a painful condition of dozing.

Once more he was confronted with a scene of his remote past.

Together with the Communist Kurt Vogel Karl had been locked up in a damp, dark dungeon. They had waited for hours to be called for interrogation: young Karl and the father of three grown-up children, his senior by about 20 years.

During all the long hours of waiting they were tormented by the cries of tortured men and women which penetrated to them through

the walls that enclosed them, and by fear and uncertainty about that which awaited them. Above all they were in painful anxiety about the question to themselves - whether they would be able to hold out. Kurt had not only given Karl strength and courage, but also insight into political causes and connections, which had decidedly influenced his entire subsequent life.

"Remember one thing, my lad," Kurt had said, "you can only hope for success in a struggle if you don't try to fight alone. Strength lies in unity. And our real enemy - that's Hitler and the Nazis. All those against those inhuman brutes must put aside the differences among their own ranks and join hands to fight the Nazis!"

Kurt had died under torture. Karl survived, without having betrayed a single name or address.

He was taken to Buchenwald concentration camp, where he took part in the resistance and ultimate liberation of the camp by the inmates.

After the war he had established a modest existence in a war-damaged flat which he had repaired in the centre of Berlin. He found work in a printing shop and married Ilse Klimm, a workmate ten years younger than himself. His two sons, Rolf and Klaus, were born in the first hard post-war years. Karl was happy with his wife and children. Firmly resolved to participate in the development of a better life, Karl joined the Communist Party, where he believed that he could best reach that aim together with people like Kurt Vogel.

He had particularly great hopes to achieve that objective, when the Social Democrats and the Communists joined in the Socialist Unity Party. Karl believed that the fatal lessons of division in the past had at last been learned.

Very soon however, that party was to disappoint him.

"80% of them are not comrades, but careerists", he had indignantly told his wife, after he recognised that a number of his "Comrades" snatched all sorts of privileges under cover of their party membership. Karl was disappointed, because the society of which he had hoped so much allowed the punishment of critics, the imprisonment of innocent men and women who had done nothing other than to voice dissent.

One day Karl happened to come across one of his comrades of Buchenwald concentrationcamp. They had not met since the end of the war. Their encounter was very moving for both men: joy that they had both survived, and painful memories...

Hans Fricke had been a Communist before 1933. His mother had to bring up her four children single handed, because her husband died when the children were still small. They lived in a basement flat in Wedding, a working class area in Berlin, on very little money which his mother brought home from hours of hard work, cleaning in the homes of wealthy families.

"You shouldn't be surprised, Karl, that so many people slipped into the SED, who should never have been accepted", Hans said. "In 1933, when it was better to be a Nazi, many changed their party badges for convenience. And in 1945, they shouted 'Heil Hitler' up to the last moment, and on May 8th they hung white sheets out of

their windows and assured the Russians that they had always been friends of Jews and Communists, and they changed their party badges once more...You could hardly believe that this meant that they had really changed! So many would still - or again - be efficient Nazis if that was the more favourable option for them!"

Karl Hansen opened his eyes again for a moment, and he saw his wife and two sons: he had not seen Klaus since he had left the GDR and gone to West Germany some years ago. When Karl retired and could have crossed the demarcation line, he never wanted to go "to the other side". Klaus married in Munich and found work in the archives of a museum thanks to a stroke of luck. He qualified as an art critic in evening courses, and all who knew him appreciated him as efficient and capable in his work. Eversince he lived in Munich Klaus had little contact with his family, apart from rare letters and occasional short visits from his mother. He knew nothing about his brother Rolf, and he forgot about his father's 80th birthday.

For years there had been serious differences between Klaus, his father and brother, and also between the two brothers.

Klaus had rejected the ambiguity and hypocrisy which he had encountered everywhere in his environment, even as a schoolboy: time and again he experienced that people had a "private" opinion at home, and an "official" opinion in public. The meetings of the Young Pioneers' and then the Free German Youth were irksome obligations to him, and he was indignant and disgusted that critical questions and remarks solicited bad marks in "Civics" and

comments in his reports about "undisciplined, divergent" conduct. He was also furious that the valuation of pupils was far more influenced by their alleged "political attitude" displayed at school than by their achievements and personal character.

The arrest of his father in 1958, and his sentence of 8 years imprisonment at the Bautzen penitentiary were a profound shock to Klaus and Rolf. At that time they were too young to understand, why their father had to be away from home for so long. When they went to visit him with their mother, they had no chance of longer conversations with him. Their mother tried to answer all their questions in such a way that the boys could nevertheless live a 'normal' life, without hatred and suspicion of their environment, and respecting their father as before.

That was very hard for Ilse. Without good friends, who believed in Karl's innocence, and who viewed the shortcomings of the Party with a similarly critical mind as Karl, and who had given Ilse moral support throughout all the years, she would never have been able to bring up her boys with the feeling that they all belonged to a family, and that their father would come back to them within the near future.

After Karl came back from Bautzen it took quite some time before they had all got used to each other again.

Karl's fair hair had turned grey, the furrows on his forehead had become deeper, and his eyes in a pale face had become even more serious and stern. His back was slightly bent when he walked, and he had lost a lot of weight.

Rolf, good at school and in sports, was popular among his classmates. He enjoyed the various activities of the youth organisation. His relationship to his father was reserved and suspicious, but he asked no questions. When his brother Klaus had been refused admission to the university, because he had stubbornly refused to "volunteer" for a term of three years' military service instead of the obligatory 18 months, Rolf had an argument with his brother, rejecting him as an "enemy of the state".

Both brothers had controversies with their father. Karl had tried to persuade Klaus to try and find work and to prepare for higher education in an evening course, if he insisted in refusing to join up for three years' "voluntary" service.

"Why can't you understand me, father", Klaus had said, "it was you who taught me to defend my own opinion, even if this would be to my disadvantage!"

"True enough," Karl had replied, "but I also told you repeatedly, that you should always consider, in how far it was necessary to accept given situations! Of course you don't need to "volunteer" for three years in the forces - but if this blocks your way to higher education, you must find another way to get where you want, there are various alternatives...Of course that would be much harder - but you would have a clear conscience! I know very well that many things are wrong in this state. But there is no Utopia on earth - least of all in former Nazi-Germany, so few years after the war. But the basic structure here can't be compared with that of the capitalist world! Education, training, employment, housing, security in sickness and old age are foundations of

life. If you have to fight for all these things before you could even start to think about studies and the future, because you can't do anything without a lot of money - then my dear boy, that is quite a different matter from sulking and protesting with a full stomach and in a comfortable home!"

As for Rolf, there had been arguments with Karl and Klaus, because Karl objected to Rolf's obstinacy and rejection of all criticism.

"If you refuse to accept any criticism", Karl had said to Rolf, "then there must be something wrong with your conviction - which is fragile and superficial."

And so there had been less confident talk and more arguments between father and sons and between the two brothers. Ilse always tried to keep the family together, to settle conflicts and avoid quarrels. Karl tried patiently and persistently to convince his sons that obstinacy and intolerance could never lead to the aim, which he himself regarded as the great objective of mankind: a life with a maximum of tolerance, justice and peace.

"If you look at the course of events in this past half century", Karl had once said to Klaus, "you will clearly recognise that Hitler and the Nazis were strong because they joined up with the big money-makers. Those opposed to Hitler were weak because they were divided. If they had united in the fight against Hitler, we would have avoided the last war and all the millions of victims."

Klaus had reproached his father, because, despite all the injustice which he had to suffer from the GDR-state he still hung on to his ideals and continued to support Socialism.

Rolf, on the other hand, considered that his brother was a "friend of capitalism" with "hostile" views, and he reproached his father for his "grumbling" and constant criticism of the state and Party.

"Karl..Karl, my dear...don't leave me...how should I live without you! My god, we've managed to cope with so much suffering...don't give up..."Ilse whispered, bending over him, and her tears ran over his bandaged face.

Karl felt her presence, he desperately wanted to speak to her, there was so much he wanted to tell her.

How many times during those 8 years in Bautzen he had longed to have her as close as she was now, to feel her warmth! He would have been able to speak to her then.He mustered all his strength to open his eyes, but they always closed again, and he fell back into a state of heavy semi-consciousness. Then the scene at the pub where he had gone for a glass of beer with his neighbour that evening came back to his confused mind.A few of his acquaintances had come in, they had started to talk.

A thick-set man aged about 50 had said: "You tell me how I could pay all the fares without the reduced season ticket for the unemployed? I have to travel about to find work, although they all say that I won't find another job at my age! But I won't go begging for social welfare assistance!"

And then the heated argument with the skinheads, which ended in an unequal fight...

When Klaus was informed about his father's plight, he immediately booked a flight to Berlin.

Many thoughts crossed Klaus' mind as he heard the even sound of the engine. He lit a cigarette and drank the coffee which the stewardess had brought. Nazis had beaten up his father, he heard his mother's voice almost suffocated with tears as she spoke over the phone; there was little hope for his survival.

His father had always been staunch in his beliefs and courageous, Klaus thought; even at his advanced age he insisted on defending his political views - views which Klaus had never been able to share.

At the age of ten Klaus had been terribly shocked when his father, who could never lie or do any harm to others, was locked up in prison for years.

As to his brother Rolf - Klaus thought of him as an obstinate dogmatic fool, who could understand his father even less than he himself.

And yet Klaus suffered from his break with the family, with whom he nevertheless felt sympathy and kinship. His happy childhood up to the outbreak of differences with his father and brother was like a warm, protected home which made him resistant against the frost outside. His mother, earthbound, practical and always full of confidence, had never allowed the family to break up completely - even during the most critical times. Letters, parcels on birthdays and other occasions and after her retirement her visits to Munich had always made Klaus feel that, basically, he had healthy roots and belonged to a family. The message that his

father would probably not have much more time to live had struck Klaus like lightning . He had forgotten his father's 80th birthday, it was long ago that he had last seen him, and he rarely thought about him. He had pushed his father's image to the back of his mind, and yet it had remained alive in his consciousness: his father, as he remembered him from the days of his childhood - strong, full of vitality, with an answer to every question and a solution to every problem; his father, who would never leave him alone if his help was needed.

Why did he have to quarrel with this man?

During the flight from Munich to Berlin Klaus remembered many scenes of his past: a "lecture" from his father, because he had preferred a football match to a Mayday demonstration; interesting book presents from his parents at the inauguration to adult life, the "Jugendweihe", which he had read with mixed feelings; they were exciting and interesting, Klaus enjoyed reading. But the "Jugendweihe" celebration was artificial and boring - one of the numerous "voluntary" obligations, which Klaus had tolerated for the sake of his father - up to that day in 1968, when he decided to go to Munich to live with his girl friend. Karin had lived with an aunt in Berlin, her parents were in Munich and after many complications Karin had been granted permission to join her parents, when her mother fell seriously ill.

The last family conflict began with the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia. Klaus was against it, his father and brother supported it, and when Klaus announced his intention to go to Munich with Karin, the rupture was final.

Karl and Ilse had much trouble to find a courageous lawyer who saved them from punishment for alleged "assistance to an act of hostility against the state".

Rolf had broken with his father, because he had considered him as "old fashioned" and "bourgeois"...Rolf could not accept his father's objection to the Russian invasion of Prague, his relentless criticism of "comrades" who claimed unjustified privileges, isolated themselves from the population and imposed unjustified limitations, such as the travel restrictions.

Like many young people in his parents' generation, who had been induced by Nazi youth leaders to oppose their parents, Rolf believed in fanatics like his teacher, who supported the policy proclaimed in the song: "The Party...is always right!" Rolf was intolerant of his father, who had brought him up in the spirit of Communism, especially after Karl had returned from Bautzen, after Ilse and her boys had firmly supported Karl.

And then the family was together again - by the side of Karl's deathbed.

It was a reunion without words.

Ilse - by that time over 70 - bent over her husband's bed, looking into his eyes in his bandaged head; these grey, almond-shaped eyes had never lost the clarity of youth.

Ilse tried to keep back her tears, she looked at him and held his hand.

Klaus and Rolf sat awkwardly on the white, hard hospital chairs with bowed heads, unable to find words. Karl woke up, he looked at his wife and sons.

"Good that you're all here", he said softly but clearly. "Just like before....together we'll manage....only together.... everything else is unimportant....together...."

Then he closed his eyes and said no more.



